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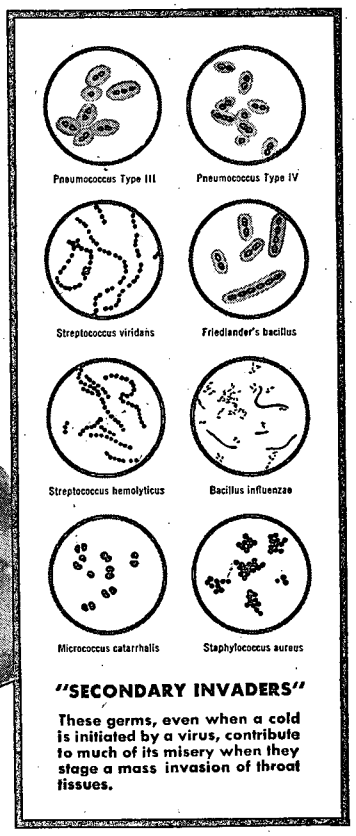
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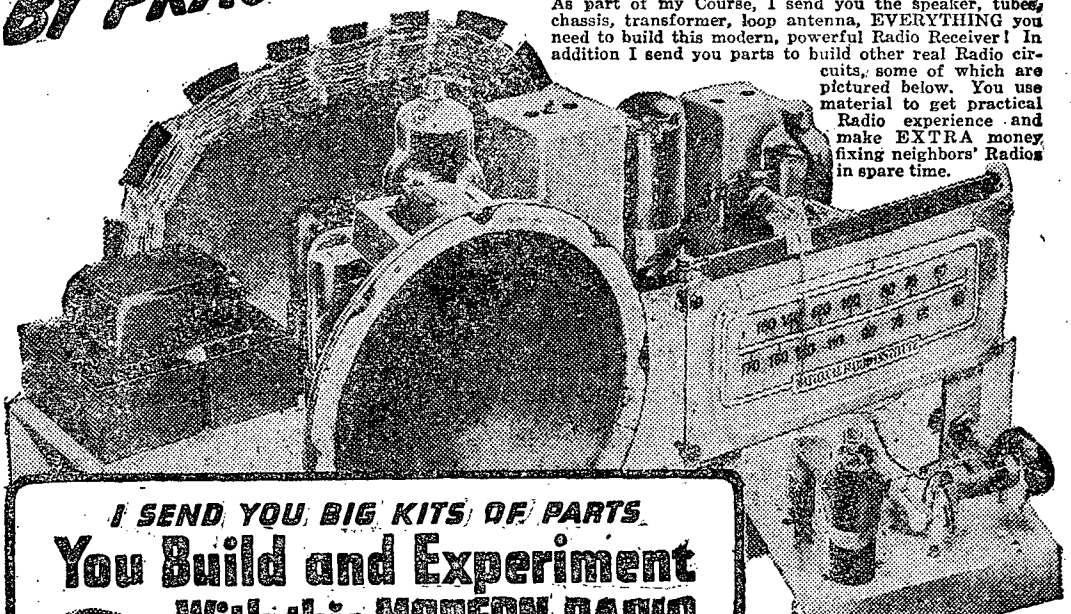

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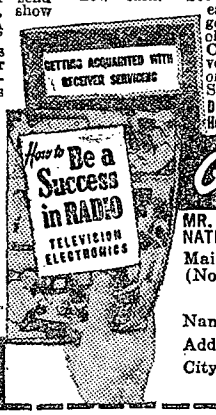

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THE BEST OF AMERICA'S ACTION ADVENTURE MYSTERY

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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

January 10th, 1949

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EVERY AUTHOR'S FINEST AND LATEST STORIES NO REPRINTS

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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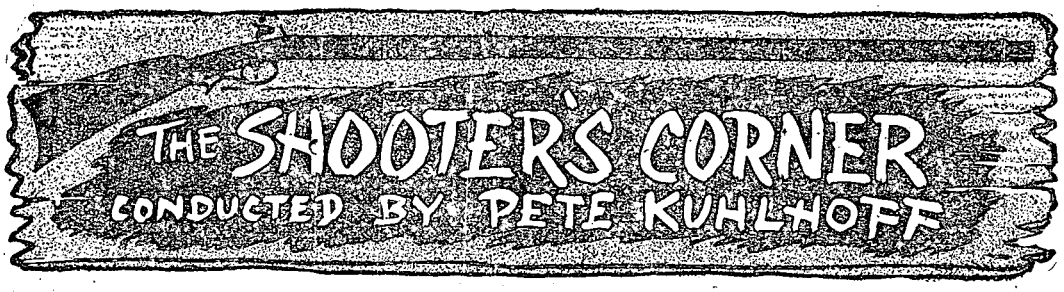

Super Precision Rifle Barrels

YESTERDAY afternoon I went over to visit a neighbor who has his shop and home a few miles from our farm. He was busy as a beaver, and doing quite a bit of cussing about a poor batch of steel that had temporarily stopped his production of rifle barrels.

This chap's name is John Gregoire and he is the fellow who has been making the ultra-precision barrels used by many bench rest shooters and long range woodchuck and crow shooters.

At this year's fall shoot of the Bench Rest Shooters Association at Johnstown, N. Y. Gregoire's barrels did themselves proud. For instance, Clair Taylor, who lives in Pennsylvania, shot a group at 100 yards which is no doubt a world's record. He used a rifle made up on a German Army Mauser '98 rifle action with a 30x1¼ inch Gregoire barrel chambered (by himself) for a wildcat cartridge known as the .219 Donaldson Wasp. The five shot group measured .187 inches (extreme spread between centers) which is less than the diameter of the .224 caliber bullets used.

This can't be considered a freak group, for the ten winners of the first day's ten matches (100 yards, 5-shots) had an average spread of only .273 inches, which is a little over a ¼ inch. And the next day the average for the ten winning groups averaged only .294 inches.

Also, Samuel Clark, Jr., of Oakland, Maine put 80 consecutive shots (in 5-shot strings) into an average group size of 9/16 inch, using a heavy Gregoire (30x1¼ inch) barrel on a Winchester Model 70 rifle action. Furthermore, Chet Leach, in a match at Bradford, Pa., using a rifle having a Gregoire barrel chambered by Alex Hoyer, shot 5 shots at 200 yards which made a group measuring 31/64 inch. The above rifles all fired the Wasp cartridge.

Now let's take a look at barrels in general, from the early 1890's when the advent of smokeless powder and the general use of jacketed bullets made it necessary to find a metal that would wear better than the wrought iron or soft carbon steel used up until that time.

Engineers got busy and a new barrel steel was developed to meet these higher requirements. It became generally known as Ordnance steel, and was used by the majority of American manufacturers of high power rifles up until the beginning of World War II.

The Winchester people, on the other hand, used a 3½ percent nickel steel from 1896 until 1930 when they started using other steels for their high power barrels.

Winchester barrels are now stamped "Winchester Proof Steel," which means that the alloy steel of that particular barrel is, in their estimation, the best steel so far developed for the purpose. I have been given to understand that the Winchester proof steel now being used in most of their high power rifle barrels is chrome moly steel.

For a short while before 1930 Winchester produced another alloy barrel that was used, at extra cost, on some of their high power rifles. It was called "stainless" steel, but strictly speaking, it was not steel at all, but a heat-treated high chrome iron, being approximately composed of 13 percent chromium, 0.10 carbon and 1.5 percent copper. It is interesting to note that these barrels could not be successfully blued by the regular process (which is, broadly speaking, nothing more than controlled rusting), so they were copper coated and the copper chemically blackened. A couple of weeks ago in a New York gun store I

(*Continued on page* 143)

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You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

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Beyond

By BERTRAND SHURTLEFF

Part I

1

THROUGH the vague dusk that passes for night at the edge of the Arctic Circle in June the prowling figure advanced cautiously. There was desperation in every stealthy movement, a desperation that kept him awake and moving when all Chandalar, Alaska, slept except himself and the droning mosquitoes. Even the two dogs that seemed to be the object of the caution were drowned in slumber, only their ears twitching occasionally in protest at the humming hordes that drilled incessantly at tender lips and nostrils and eyelids.

Inch by slow inch the intruder slid forward. A moccasin-clad foot would lift, poise, descend without the rolling of a single pebble, even when the weight shifted forward from one tensed leg to the other.

The bigger of the two dogs stirred in his sleep, half lifted his big black face, seemed to question the air with dilating nostrils. With the canine's movement, the prowler lifted the club in his right hand, but he lowered it with an inaudible sigh when the dog moaned a protest at the mosquitoes and let his dark face down into the ruff of creamy yellow fur that made a frame for the black head. Then the shaggy form shuddered, stretched and lay still again.

Two more careful steps brought the man close enough for the attack. The club lifted again, even as the fingers of his left hand clutched the heavy sealskin thongs tighter.

Then the smaller dog stirred, yawned noisily, started to stretch his ridiculously ugly shape. All knobby bones and twisted wiry hair, his ears shortened from too frequent exposure to cruel frosts, he looked a travesty of the canine family, even in a land where dogs are bred for utility instead of beauty.

The faint breeze was in the wrong direction to bring the scent of the stranger even the few feet to the dog's nose. All unaware of that poised club, he surged to his feet and stuck one hind leg out stiffly behind him to its full extremity. He held it there a full minute in an effort to shove it yet another inch farther, then put it down and repeated the action with the other. With a snort he

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the Brooks

A Renegade Makes Off With Gold and Supplies; That's Serious. But to Steal Dogs, Human in Their Devotion— the North Was Indeed Aroused

whining pests, reluctant to open his eyes for fear mosquitoes would dive into them and blind him.

That club, aimed at first for the bigger dog, had shifted slightly. Now it crashed savagely, striking just behind the tattered ears, smashing the smaller of the dogs into a kicking spasm of unconsciousness.

The thud brought the larger dog to his feet, his massive body quivering. True to his training in the Army K9 Corps, he neither barked nor growled, but stood blinking and sniffling, trying to comprehend what was happening.

Before he could realize that he and his companion had been attacked, the club came down again, this time at his own head. He ducked just enough at sight of the descending cudgel to avoid complete unconsciousness, but the blow half stunned him and the slashing sealskin thongs came down across his tender snout with a violence that brought tears to his eyes and such a pain as he had never experienced before.

Dazed, half blinded, the dog crouched far back on his haunches, his mighty muscles coiling for the spring, his long fangs bared for the slash. But the attacker meant to give no opportunity for the big dog to rally. The club swung again and again at the shaggy head, battering, dazing, blinding, while the thongs lashed with an equal fury across the lifting nose.

PIERRE LEMOINE, renegade halfbreed killer, but recently escaped from the custody of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, thought that he knew dogs. For years he had driven the half wild beasts of northern Canada at the sledges, battering them into submission, extracting every ounce of service from them before lashing them to death in their traces or discarding them for better when their usefulness waned.

"*Sacré*, you no know when you get enough, eh?" he snarled in a guarded tone, hitting still harder. "Mus' be you get your head bus' before I'm quit."

But the big beast could endure no more. Suddenly he pitched limply across the slumped and unconscious figure of his comrade.

Minutes later the dogs were jerked and

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kicked and prodded into life by the triumphant Lemoine. The sealskin thongs had become harnesses that bound them, muzzles that held their jaws tight shut, leashes that held them to the grinning halfbreed.

Yanking, tugging, cursing under his breath, he hauled them along, bruising their ribs by kicking savagely with the side of his foot as they lagged, menacing them with the club that he still carried in readiness if they showed more fight.

Nor was this the worst of their humiliation. In the brush beyond the village he halted and tied to their protesting backs the loads he had prepared for them. Fully aware that he would be hunted mercilessly himself and that the country into which he was heading was almost devoid of game, he must pack supplies for his journey or starve somewhere in the towering ice-clad Brooks Mountains ahead. Accordingly he had raided a store earlier in the night and cached in the bush more edibles than he could possibly carry himself. Then he had crept upon the two dogs, guided by inquiries he had made of an Indian he had plied with whiskey down the trail below Chandalar and then robbed of rifle and seal-hide ropes.

Pierre LeMoine had known about these dogs. He knew they would not yap like the native variety at his approach, making their theft easier. He knew their strength too and their incredible endurance, especially that of the bigger dog, Huskie. He had heard also of the prowess of Spareribs, the smaller, of his refusal to quit before the worst weather the Arctic could hurl at him in spite of his thinner coat. But there was even greater satisfaction in the theft than the knowledge that he had acquired two excellent pack animals. Sedgewick and Trueman, the owners of the dogs, had been instrumental in bringing about his arrest, and revenge tasted sweet.

"Me, Pierre LeMoine, I'm show you I'm never forget," he grinned his ugly gap-toothed smile in the direction of the town where the men slept. "Nobody he's goin' hol' Pierre. He slippery like one eel. Always he squirm it free an' make trouble for who ees turn him in."

He jerked at the leashes, thudded a heel against aching ribs, careful to save his own toes, and menaced with the club. Momentarily cowed and confused, cringing with the dizzying ache that club had inflicted, sore, overburdened, unable to shake or paw their loads off, clouted savagely every time they tried, the two dogs slunk away before the verbal and physical beratings.

"Me, I could sing like voyageur, on'y somebody sure to hear and tell," he chuckled, bent forward under his own load, but inured to burdens after years on the portages of Canadian rivers. "Let Red Jacket follow. Me, I'm break his heart on the trail."

He had nearly broken the hearts of the dogs already. Softened by weeks of good living in town, accustomed more to the pull of traces than this crushing burden on their backs, they cowered and drooped. But LeMoine had saved enough of the sealskin for a lash with which to clout them across tender noses or flick under their sides with a savage snap that cracked like a pistol and ripped thin hair and hide away to leave a bloody spot for mosquitoes and midges to feast upon.

Spareribs whirled on him and almost threw him off balance the first time that lash cut. Huskie, seeing what he believed to be an opportunity, rushed from the side. LeMoine went down in a terrified heap, unaccustomed to dogs that dared resist in such a fashion so soon after a cruel beating.

Huskie stood over him, remembering his Army training from long before, seeking in vain to sink his fangs into the man's throat for the killing slash at windpipe or jugular. But the thongs about his jaws had been tied too tightly. He could not nip at the filthy garments nor seize even a tiny pinch of flesh.

Shaking with terror, the halfbreed lay there for half a minute, expecting to be killed by the dogs above him. Then, realizing his safety from muzzled fangs, he kicked savagely, rolled free as rapidly as his pack would allow, and fought out of the straps. Then he was on his feet again, flailing with club and lash, jerking them back for more and more of the punishment, yet watching craftily that he stop short of crippling them for the trail ahead.

Panting and wheezing with exertion, he finally subdued them enough, shouldered his pack again, urged them onward. With bent legs and heaving sides, with bitter hatred in their eyes and an unconquerable

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spirit glinting behind the animosity, they responded grudgingly to the jerking and tugging and crept along beside him. But there was none of the joy of labor in their attitude such as they had known when dashing through the snow in harness, dragging loads behind them on the sledge of their real masters. Then work had been a pleasure, heightened by the brisk cold and the promise of food at the end of a day's run, spiced by words of approval from understanding and appreciative masters. Now their lot seemed to be killing labor and brutal abuse.

LEMOINE knew that the law would soon be on his trail. He had escaped from Corporal Dunbar of the Mounted between Dawson and Selkirk by diving suddenly through a window as the train rounded a curve on its way through the muskeg. The mossy swamp had broken his fall, and he had run deep into the brush beyond the quag before the train could be halted and Dunbar could start after him. Then he had made a dash for the Alaskan boundary to give his Canadian pursuer extradition trouble if he should ever catch up with him.

He had robbed the Indian as a matter of course, after getting him drunk on whiskey he had stolen from a trusting trapper who thought he was lost from a road gang and going wild in the bush. But the Indian had no shells for his rifle and insufficient food. Robbing the store was a matter of necessity, even if it would bring local law officers after him.

LeMoine shrugged off the thought as he trotted away with the dogs. He had spent too many years on the trail and in the woods to worry about being followed. He would resort to the tricks of the wiliest of the wild things he had trapped in the past.

The trail forked ahead. He took the left path and grinned shrewdly. Up this, miles beyond the mountain passes, lay the claim Sedgewick and Trueman had worked. Trackers would assume he was heading for gold they might have left behind when they dashed for Chandalar to record their finding of the mother lode before it could be jumped.

The dull gray that was darkness for the area at this season was already giving away to the brightness of early dawn. Chandalar would not be awake for two or three hours more, but he must put all the miles possible behind him before the sleepers rolled out, discovered their losses, and set out after him.

He had been over the trail before during the winter and knew there were long stretches where he must have miles of lead or be seen. Burdened as he was, he must cross the first of those at least, for he could not leave the trail short of that first rocky pass without leaving sign that even the most stupid could follow.

Panting, gasping, bent low under his load, he urged the dogs onward. Every cringing delay on their part drove him frantic. He must elude his pursuers somehow before they came pelting up the trail after him.

Tugging, cursing, snarling, he hurried the over-loaded dogs along until their legs ached, their sides heaved with their gasping urge for breath. Yet the man refused to halt and rest them or himself. Mopping sweat and mosquitoes, driving dogs and his own bent body, he scrambled and shuffled up and up the long slow climb of the valley that reached ever higher toward a pass.

Beyond that narrow opening lay rocky ledges on either hand, harsh stone that would make difficult walking but would retain no sign of their passing. Somehow he must make those ledges and lose himself at an angle from the trail.

Up and up he went. When he was forced to halt for wind, he did not lower his pack, but stood vibrating with it to every gasping breath, while he turned and stared squintingly behind him.

There was smoke over Chandalar. Somebody was stirring. At any minute the storekeeper might discover his loss or Trueman might walk out to visit his dogs, for he knew that the owners spoiled the beasts and treated them like children.

He snarled at them now and kicked them into action. Balancing on one foot to deliver a blow with the other heel proved so difficult, he resorted to the lash again. It bit and stung remorselessly, sent the poor team scurrying.

NEITHER Huskie nor Spareribs moved willingly. They seemed to sense that each mile took them farther from the hope of release, that delay might bring about their rescue.

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Yet they dared not delay. The lurching, swaying, panting figure that drove them would allow no delay. His tongue and sealskin drove them. His frantic glances backward might make them prick their ears and try to understand what he feared back in the valley they were leaving, but their dim vision could discern nothing. The wind brought them no message of pursuit.

Up he fought them, struggling to keep his own feet and manage his own burden. His strength and endurance were worthy of a better cause, but desperation rode him. Arrest for such a petty thing as theft of the rifle or the stores did not disturb him, but he knew that arrest in Alaska would mean extradition to Canada and the noose that was waiting for him there. He was hurrying for very life itself—and the life his own.

The steepness of the trail increased. Loose rocks rolled under his feet, often pitching him to one knee. But he always managed to sway that pack aloft again after each stumble, to recover his balance, to go on and up.

The dogs could have given him trouble now if they had not been so thoroughly beaten that they could think of nothing but plodding onward to avoid that stinging lash. A quick dash down the ascent would have pulled him over, to slide after them on his belly as they fled, but they were beyond such hope. Their only thought was to keep beyond that biting lash and those flailing feet.

With a mighty heave he hurled himself over the crest and down the other side of the ridge until he knew he was well hidden from anyone who might be following. Then he halted, tied the dogs securely to a rock, shrugged off his pack, and crept back toward the notch.

Stealthily he slid forward until he could search out every twist and turn of the trail far down the valley he had just ascended. Not a thing moved within his vision. The only indication of humanity that he could see was the faint wisp of blue in the distance that might be smoke from Chandalar chimneys or might be nothing more than morning haze.

He had made the pass without being observed. Assured of this after a long pause, he was startled into action by the faint noise from behind. That slavering champ was not the sound of a dog fighting off pests.

With an oath he flung himself at the dogs again, seizing the thong that held them in one groping hand and his whip in the other. The leash jerked, the lash bit and stung.

"I learn you it is bes' you don' chew the strap," he screamed, flailing at them again and again. You ain't fool Pierre LeMoine, you dog of a dog. I show who is boss on trail."

When he tired of beating them and they lay exhausted on the rocks, their crushing burdens pulling them over to one side, he swung his pack to his back again, adjusted the head strap, and urged them to their feet.

Leaving the trail at right angles, where a cleft in the rocks would offer footing for a long slanting descent far to the right, he hurried them down before him. They were well above the tree line here with not even a stunted willow on the ridge. Nothing but bare rocks lay before them for hundreds of yards before the ridge dipped into brush again.

They scrambled and limped and slid and clawed their way fully three hundred yards before the cleft finally pinched out, leaving them a sharper descent down an almost perpendicular wall.

LeMoine braced himself, after dropping his pack, and drove the dogs down. Clawing and whimpering, hampered by their loads, they would have sprawled and tumbled and rolled ignominiously far down the ridge, but for his retarding leash. By digging moccasined toes into the crevices in the ledge he lowered them down the worst of the face. Then he left them cowering on a narrow shelf, too terrified by their experience to attempt further descent alone, while he went back up the wall for his own load.

A careful survey of the spot where they had left the trail revealed not the slightest evidence of their passing. The dogs' toenails had left no scratches on the harder rocks. The best tracker in Alaska could search in vain here for their sign.

Chuckling at his own cleverness, he lowered his pack in the same way he had lowered the dogs, kicking it free when it stuck, clinging to the ledge by every trick he could devise.

Then he left the dogs marooned on their

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ledge while he slid his pack down to the valley beyond. Having no desire to follow him and being incapable of climbing the sheer wall behind them, they were forced to wait, untied though they were, for his return.

He came up again, grim and gasping. The elation that had swept over him as he looked back along the valley toward Chandalar was gone. Weariness was fast overcoming him, hastened by the look he had just had at the country ahead.

Leaving the trail had undoubtedly thrown off any possible pursuers, but the prospect was far from inviting. The ridge dipped into a valley where tangled undergrowth, jagged rocks, and an utter absence of anything like a trail promised the hardest going. Although the valley was carpeted with moss on the sides and laced with scrub Arctic willows along the bottom, it was rimmed with sheer rock walls, veritable mountains where snow still clung to every deep crevice. Beyond these, all but lost in the mists, were others, higher, more forbidding, wrapped in perpetual glaciers.

"Me, I'm fin' a way t'rough," he fairly screamed in defiance. "Not'ing stop de true voyageur like Pierre LeMoine."

But sheer exhaustion halted him at last. Small as each willow branch might be, those branches were interlaced and tough with years of slow growth. They tripped and tugged at feet and ankles, forcing detours where they were thickest, causing great exertion where he could find no winding passage through their maze. His strength ebbed.

With an oath he halted in a dense growth and grinned at the discomfort of the dogs. They found progress through the tiny sticks annoying too and held their mosquito-bitten heads high, blinking and cowering at each lash of a freed branch that stung and cut as it slapped against welts and bruises.

"Dis hol' you, if you chew da strap," he cackled.

He threw off his own burden and started to relieve the dogs of theirs, but thought better of it. Laden like that, they would not be tempted to gnaw free. Wearing the packs while they slept would be equivalent to a hobble they could not shake loose.

Grinning at his astuteness, heedless of the discomfort of the panting animals, he curled down and was almost instantly asleep.

II

EX-SERGEANT TRUEMAN awoke with a vague sense of premonition. He had often felt just like that in the jungles of New Guinea during World War II when a Jap sniper might be lurking in any tree along the trail, or during the winter just passed when prowlers had threatened the gold claim he and his partner, Sedgewick, had been working up beyond the mountains.

Now he kept his thick black brows down in a deep frown and his lids clamped tight shut while he tried to remember just where he had fallen asleep. In his befuddled condition of half wakefulness an age seemed to pass before he allowed his eyes to open a slit in search of the threat he sensed hung over him.

Blinking at the walls, he remembered and grinned sheepishly. He was comfortably housed in Chandalar, idling while Sedgewick, his former lieutenant in the K9 Corps, recovered from a bullet wound in his leg which had necessitated a delicate patching operation on the tendons and a long period of recuperation. There was no immediate urge to rise and shine for the glory of the U.S. Army nor the driving call of unmined gold.

Luxuriating, he stretched two hairy arms high over his head and struck the newly installed radio, almost knocking it off the stand his host had provided for it.

Sight of the instrument brought back his thoughts to that premonition. His worries had undoubtedly stemmed from all those yarns that had prompted him to buy the thing.

For the last five days he had been sure he was the object of a terrific rib. Everybody in town had evidently been tipped off to help kid him, until they had him half believing their preposterous story.

Pierre LeMoine, the halfbreed who had shot Sedgewick during a wild dash to record the mother lode from which the gold came, had been arrested weeks ago by the United States marshal of the district and turned over to Corporal Dunbar of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Subse-

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quently he had been taken back to Canada for trial for the alleged murder of a prospector somewhere in the Peace River area.

The inhabitants of Chandalar had been telling Trueman that news had come over the radio that LeMoine had escaped. Diving through a train window just below Dawson, he had rolled into a muskeg and fled before Dunbar could halt the train and overtake him.

Day after day they kept needling the scowling Trueman with reports.

"No word from Dunbar yet," somebody would sigh, shaking his head as he glanced obliquely at the ex-sergeant. "If them dogs was mine—"

"Aw, don't worry about the dogs," Trueman would snort. "Even if that guy was free—"

"But he is," another would protest. "Don't you ever listen to the radio?"

He had listened for hours between his trips to the dogs and to where Sedgewick was sitting up and complaining because he was not allowed to use the injured leg at all. But he had never caught a single word about any escape, nor any of the warnings that his tormentors insisted were being issued to all Alaska to be on the alert.

He grinned at the extremity some of the goons had reached in trying to impress him. They even carried rifles and revolvers or automatics, claiming they expected the renegade to make for Chandalar in revenge.

HE FINGERED the dial and waited for the tubes to warm. No need to hang around the store to listen to the semi-public set there, laying himself open to more of their razzing. Just lie here in bed and stretch and verify his conviction they were only ribbing him.

"—leaving the suspected murdered still at large," the news announcer was proclaiming, as his voice blared suddenly in the still room.

Trueman lurched to an elbow and strained to listen.

"After his exposure Corporal Dunbar was completely exhausted, but, true to the code of the Mounted, he insisted on being rushed to Fairbanks in quest of a plane to continue pursuit of the escaped prisoner. Having spent five days in the muskegs and mountains without supplies, the corporal was reduced to skin and bones, with face and hands horribly swollen with mosquito bites.

"He expressed the belief LeMoine, unless he had found aid, must be dead by now, but he reiterated the warning previously broadcast by this station: Pierre LeMoine, half French, half Indian, is known to be a dangerous character. Eastern Alaska is warned to be on the alert for him and to guard against treachery and cunning if he is sighted, for the man is utterly unscrupulous."

Trueman was no longer enjoying his rest. As the voice turned to other matters of news value, he was frantically grabbing for his clothes. That sense of premonition was returning even stronger now, and he dug his rifle out of the pile of duffel before he strode for the door.

He felt sure that LeMoine could survive. Born in the woods and accustomed all his life to the hardships and deprivations of the trail, he would be even better fitted for such travel than the trained Mountie. Five days would have sufficed to bring him back this far, if he had harbored thoughts of revenge against the partners. In fact, his only hope for safety lay in plunging into the great hinterland where no white man might see him for months and even years on end.

REALIZING that a desperate renegade heading for those vast tracks would find dogs invaluable, Trueman started on a run for the place where he had left Huskie and Spareribs.

The two dogs from the K9 Corps had so aroused the jealousies of the native dogs that no peace existed while they were staked close together. In the interests of community quiet he had long ago moved the two well beyond the village, where they could no longer exchange canine curses and threats with the hardy mongrels that were merely tolerated by their owners during the long hot months before they became indispensable on the snowy trails of winter.

Adgloo, their Eskimo guide and helper, had shown the typical native attitude toward the care of the animals. He was content to let them suffer from heat and flies, feeding them but sparingly and even ignoring their need for clean water as they panted in the sun. Although he had always worked willingly at every previous task assigned him,

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he had been sullen and grudging of his labors when Trueman kept suggesting that the dogs be given better care.

Packing Adgloo off on a plane to visit his tribe at Point Barrow, Trueman had gladly assumed responsibility for the animals. Now, as he fairly ran toward their stakes, he regretted letting Adgloo make a trip home, since the Eskimo had always slept close to the dogs and would have heard a prowler.

Anxiously Trueman sent his shrill whistle across the intervening rods. Mongrels heard and yapped in the native kennels, but no sound came from ahead. No eager shapes leaped at their chains to welcome him. No paws appeared over the crude fence Adgloo had finally contrived. No heads lifted. Not a sign of frisking body or flailing tail showed through the irregular sticks the Eskimo had lashed together.

Trueman's lope changing into a sprint. His frown was deep and threatennig now. His eyes narrowed.

Grimly he stared at the scene of combat, noting the drops of blood, the scuffed earth where Huskie had resisted, the tracks of the patched and torn moccasins.

Jerking up his head he stared hard up the trail, searching every foot of terrain for some moving object, hoping against hope to see the renegade struggling with the reluctant dogs somewhere in the distance.

His first instinct was to dash off along the trail in pursuit of the thief and accused murderer, but he read the meaning of that halt for the putting on of packs, and the sight sobered him. Equipped with nothing but a rifle and a magazine load of shells, he would be only inviting disaster to start off alone and without food supplies into those wastes to the northward. He had come down across those mountains in winter and knew their desolation. Up here in the North the presence of human life was a certain indication of the presence of game, since the nomadic natives lived by hunting —and those mountains had been empty of human beings except along the fringes. A man could not hope to live off the country up there, even in the summer.

Whirling from his survey of the trail, he sped toward the store.

"Make me up a pack," he blurted, heedless of the confusion as the owner tried to take some kind of inventory of his losses from the raid LeMoine had made during the night. "Grub for a quick trip into the hills. Be back after it."

He was off to tell his partner, still running.

"They weren't kidding," he gasped, facing Sedgewick. "LeMoine escaped."

Sedgewick smiled that slow superior grin that always antagonized his former subordinate.

"I doubt if we need to worry," he said soothingly, as though to a child. "My scalp is still fairly firm."

"So's mine," belligerently, "but our dogs are gone."

The blonde curls had been tossed back by the quick lift of the head. The boyish expression had vanished. The blue eyes lost their mocking laughter and were suddenly cold and piercing.

"They were stolen last night," blurted Trueman. "Clubbed groggy, loaded with packs, and driven northward up the trail." Then he added triumphantly, "And the tracks show that the thief wore moccasins and toed in with his left foot."

Adgloo had called their attention to this peculiarity of the halfbreed's tracks, evidently a heritage from his Indian blood.

Sedgewick suddenly swept the bedclothing aside and would have lurched his legs to the floor with a mighty swing, but Trueman anticipated the action and threw a restraining arm over them, holding them down.

"None of that," he warned. "Doc told me it's no dice. Leg might seem as sound as ever the first few steps. Might even carry you for miles. Then she'd rip loose and let you down any instant."

As the light in the blue eyes softened and the struggling form relaxed, he added, "It was up to me to look after 'em. I told Addy I would. I'll bring 'em back. I just stopped in to tell you where I'm heading, while they throw a pack together for me. You know what that country's like. Got to lug in grub or eat moss soup."

"Not alone," protested Sedgewick. "He'll ambush you, the way he did me."

"Got to risk it, Sedge. There'll be a hornet's nest around here in a few hours and plenty of guns following. He robbed

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the store, and they sent word out. Corporal Dunbar and the marshal will be flying in. A bunch of the local boys'll be hustling back here to try to grab off the reward—but that trail's getting colder every minute.

"I'm shoving along to see what I can find. I'm traveling light and hoping to overtake him. If I'm not back within a few days, get a plane to look me up and drop me grub."

"I'll chance the leg—"

"You'll do nothing of the sort."

"They've saved my life more'n once, True. I'm not letting them down."

"Look, Sedge, if you don't stay put, you may never walk right again. Doc said the big cord was frayed to a frazzle but was still holding enough so she may mend with his splicin' work. But a quick jerk could rip her clear free. You'll need that hopper more later. Stay put while I chase the guy. I'm only scouting for the bunch that'll be hitting that trail within the next few hours. With us after him on foot and planes scouring for him, he can't get far at this time of year. Lay still and mend that hopper. You'll need it when snow flies and we start back for the claim."

The timely arrival of the doctor gave Trueman his chance to get away. He was off at a lope toward the store.

"Here's the best I could do," moaned the storekeeper, helping him sling a light pack to his shoulders. "Snowshoe Charlie just left to get word to the marshal and that Mountie. Nobody around to go with you, eh? It's a pity he struck when he did and all hands was away. I'd go along myself, only them Injuns would clean out what the halfbreed left—and I'm too old for the trail. Never mind payin' me. Get the wolverine that robbed my store and that'll square accounts."

No need for the trembling old hands to shove Trueman toward the door. No need for the quavering voice to urge haste. The ex-sergeant was off at a jog trot, bent forward under his pack, yet running easily, even with the load.

LeMoine had taken all he and the dogs could carry, anticipating months and possibly years alone in the wilds. His pursuer carried only supplies for ten days, leaving him greater mobility. The renegade could not hope for help from searching planes or well stocked pursuit parties, for every hand would be turned against him.

JOGGING a half mile, walking briskly a short space, then breaking into a trot again, Trueman ate away the long miles. The sun slid high enough to pour heat at him, reflecting its rays up from the rocks and gravel and scanty vegetation, setting the entire landscape to dancing in shimmering waves. Sweat poured from him, saturating his clothing, irritating the skin where pack-straps sawed. Lungs protested. Muscles that had softened during those weeks in town began to ache.

The steepening trail cut his trot to a hurried walk, the walk to a mad scramble, the scramble to a mere forward lurch.

No need to wonder about the trail. Frequent marks of paws and moccasined feet showed that his quarry was ahead. That left foot toed even harder on the steep grade, gripping, digging. At places he saw prints of knees and hands where the struggling wretch ahead had pitched forward in his frantic efforts to top the ridge and slip through the gap beyond.

The sight sobered Trueman, halted his mad plunge upward. If the breed was as tired as the signs indicated, he might be holed up at the top waiting to pick off his pursuers while they scrambled up that open trail.

Stopping, he swung off his pack, crouched behind it, studied the ridge.

There was no other course open. On either side the jumble of rocks lifted to sheer ledges up which he could not hope to climb, where he would be even more exposed than on the trail that went up and up toward the pass.

Grimly he slid the pack ahead of him, crawled after it, slid it farther. Eyes glued on the gap for a glint of sunlight on rifle barrel, he edged slowly upward. The pack would give him some protection if he turned on his side and lay extended at length behind it. The contents would certainly slow, if they would not stop or deflect, a rifle bullet. He had his own weapon in readiness and kept his eyes on that narrow defile, determined to get in a shot himself before the renegade could pump a second one at him.

It was slow hard work, but he knew safety demanded it. Jap snipers had taught

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him the value of caution and the futility of reckless bravado back on New Guinea. This was gruelling work, but he would manage.

The climb seemed endless, especially with the expectation every minute of a crashing bullet tearing through the pack at him. But he had known similar anxiety too often to stop now. The plight of the dogs in the hands of that ruthless breed steeled him for the struggle, for he had grown more fond of the animals in their years of companionship that he would ever have admitted in his sullen way.

There being nobody to listen, he clamped his jaws grimly shut on the grousing that would have purpled the atmosphere and inched the pack and his crouching body higher and higher. The rocks were heated under him and broiled his body and legs. Mosquitoes, drawn by the perspiration, swarmed and hummed about him in a cloud. At times he sucked them into nostrils and mouth and snorted or spat them out, expecting each sound to draw fire from above.

Aching in every unaccustomed muscle, he drew nearer the top, still without sight or sound of the breed. With sudden resolution he swung the pack to his shoulders, pushed himself almost erect, and dashed up the last few rods, his rifle at the ready.

Nothing moved in the defile. Only the rocks shimmered and danced in the heat. He heard neither the startled gasp of the renegade nor the welcoming whine of the dogs.

For a long minute he stood staring down the valley ahead where the trail grew dim from lack of usage. With squinted eyes he peered at every rock that might offer shelter for an ambuscade, every clump of willows that might hide man and dogs.

Nothing stirred except that tantalizing shimmer of the countryside. No sound came from the desolate expanse beyond, the deep valley with a heat haze like faint smoke hiding the towering heights, where the unaided eye could not tell banking masses of possible clouds from glacier sheeted peaks, from the ridges that he could see faintly as they stretched away to hem in the valley he faced.

Readjusting his pack, he stood and turned his head, aware that motion in the distance would register quicker on his eyes if viewed at an angle than at full face. Still he could detect not the faintest motion of anything, although he had half expected the dogs to sense his nearness and either give tongue or struggle into view somehow to welcome him.

Grimly he turned and started down the rocky path into the valley. Nothing but sheer stone stretched ahead of him for hundreds of yards. No use to look here for signs of his quarry. Moccasins would leave no nail scratches on the ledges. Even the horny toenails of the dogs would fail to register here. But there was nowhere else for the escaping breed to go but down that faint track. On either side the valley stretched away, its sides precipitous beyond traveling, its ends pinching out in cul de sacs that would bar escape.

New muscles came into play now as he held back his weight from plunging down the grade, but the sensation was pleasanter than that of the hard climb. He could breathe easier and mop the sweat and chase the hordes of droning mosquitoes away.

Water had coursed down the faint trail and scoured it deeper, carrying off any soil that might have accumulated through the centuries. Nowhere for weary miles did he find anything that would have taken the imprint of passing paws or feet. Then he saw muskeg ahead of him and grinned harshly at the prospect.

The moss would be dry at the edges and at the top, he knew, but out in the center of the big quag would be water, cold, icy water ankle deep, lying on top of solid ice. But the faint trace of a trail ran straight toward the moss.

Suddenly he halted, staring. Although the trail led to that moss, he could discern no footprints in the growth, none of the dents that would indicate the recent passage of man and dogs.

He had traveled too many miles of similar muskegs to believe LeMoine and the animals could have crossed without leaving depressions everywhere they set foot, little crushed hollows into which the water would have seeped by now, murky water alive with wriggling mosquito larvae.

Slowly he swung his gaze up and down the expanse of level moss. Nowhere, as far as he could see under the thickening haze, was there any sign of a crossing.

Just to be sure, he put a foot into the

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moss, pressed it down, and withdrew it. The crushed fronds made an effort to lift but remained broken or bent as he had anticipated.

Nothing had crossed that bog directly ahead of him for weeks, probably not since the snow and ice melted.

With a grunt of disappointment he swung his pack to earth and squinted again across the morass. Thinking he saw some irregularity far to his left, he trudged along the rocky rim of the muskeg, unwilling to soak his feet in the icy water beneath that moss until necessity demanded.

Still scowling with disappointment he walked a full mile along the curving edge of the hollow, ripping through willows, scrambling over rocks, scanning that moss in vain for proof of passing. Then he came to a high narrow comb of rock that jutted from the ridge he had just crossed and thrust its extremity well out into the bog. Neither man nor dogs could, he felt sure, have passed that way.

Grimly he whirled and went back toward his pack. Aware just how tricky and treacherous his quarry could be, he was relieved to find his food untouched. But the muskeg looked as unmarked to his right as it had been to his left. Man and dogs seemed to have vanished.

III

HUNGRILY Trueman wolfed a few mouthfuls of the food he extracted from the pack. He was totally unaware of the taste, for his attention was centered on that rocky expanse above him. His gaze studied every possible escape for man and dogs, but found no promising passage along the sheer walls.

He bent and scowled at the murky water that had seeped into the footprint he had made in the moss. The mud was settling, but his shadow had stirred the myriad wrigglers into motion. He had to wait for them to settle into the mud again before lowering his lips and sucking in the icy water. Even then he was forced to stop after the first long drag, for the larvae were up again with the suction.

"No chlorine flavor, anyhow," he consoled himself, after drinking all he dared, shuddering a little at the wrigglers burrowing into the muddy settlings, and turning to his pack.

Since he assumed the renegade must have gone to the right, he could see no advantage in leaving his pack behind now. Although relief from the weight had been welcome, he knew he ran the risk of having the contents stolen if LeMoine lurked in that jumble of rocks somewhere around him.

Still studying the rocks behind and above, he trudged slowly along the rim of the muskeg toward the right. There were low willows interlaced along the rim, the only hiding-place he believed capable of concealing both man and dogs. If LeMoine lurked anywhere near, he must be in the low growth.

Holding his rifle at the ready, with the safety off, he went gingerly along. A man must be careful traveling such country with rifle in readiness. A jut of rock or a concealed willow branch might trip him, discharging the weapon and possibly injuring him. He might bleed to death before the other pursuers of the renegade could find him.

Furthermore, he was beginning to believe that his quarry had not fled far. Unaware that the muskeg lay in the valley to reveal to pursuers that he had not held the trail, the wiley halfbreed must have thought to evade pursuit by finding a way across those rocks. Exhausted from his five-day dash from Canada, the man must have hidden somewhere and fallen asleep.

The ledges grew more perpendicular as Trueman advanced, came down to jut into the very muskeg. He was forced to make his choice between scrambling up the cliffs or sloshing through the wet moss.

Climbing would expose him to rifle fire if the renegade saw him. But wading in the muskeg would soften his moccasins until the rocks would cut them to shreds if he was forced to climb again. Since he would be exposed on the muskeg, if LeMoine was awake and watching, he chose the climb.

Not being an expert climber, he started up without much study of the face. Hands and feet found ready grips for some distance, but the face grew smoother as he climbed. Soon he was spread-eagled against a wall and searching vainly for finger and toe holds that would keep that dragging

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weight of pack from tumbling him backward down the steep climb.

Suddenly a dog sneezed somewhere far off, just as Trueman was thinking what a perfect target he presented spread out like that, unable to defend himself if discovered. Startled, he lost his grip, slid, lurched, fell.

He had not climbed far, but the fall seemed endless. It terminated finally in a sudden flash of terrific pain in his right ankle, followed by crashing blackness and what he knew, even in experiencing the sensation, must be unconsciousness and its wild nightmares.

THE drone of mosquitoes finally merged into one enormous hum of a giant specimen of the breed. Bigger than the fabled New Guinea type that specialized in carrying off Sea Bees, this one was bigger than a Jap bomber and just as noisy. Instinctively he kept his eyes shut and flattened his body against the rocks as the hum became a roar that seemed to pass over and diminish somewhat, although it seemed an age in passing.

Fighting against the terrific ache in the back of his head, he tried to master his wheeling reason and bring himself out of the dream. With a super human effort he shook his head. Instantly such a pain stabbed him behind the ears that he threw up both hands to clutch whatever might remain of his shattered skull to hold it in place.

His hands found something wet and sticky. His eyes flew open, blinking at fingers that he held forward for inspection. As he recognized coagulating blood on them, he gazed around in bewilderment at the rocks and heard that drumming drone again. Even as he flattened himself to hug the rocks closer as the plane wheeled and came back in a sweep, he oriented himself and tried to lift to his feet to wave. But a fresh stab of pain in his right ankle and a numbness that refused to force joints and tendons to function sent him sprawling.

For a long minute he stared at the swollen ankle. Then he rolled over on his back and started waving madly.

He lay, he now saw, in the shadow of a lifting rock, wedged down into a crevice, concealed except from directly overhead. Fighting off the nausea that followed the attempt to use his right foot, he was aware that the drone had diminished, the plane had swept on out of sight.

Then he remembered the sneeze of the dog that had startled him and precipitated his fall. The fingers groping for the rifle halted their frantic efforts to get the piece ready to fire. The renegade must have been awakened by the dog's sneeze, the clatter of his fall, or the roar of that plane. The discharge of the rifle would be more likely to draw the halfbreed to finish him than the plane to rescue him, especially since the shells were loaded with smokeless powder and would leave no wafting cloud to reveal his location to eager eyes scanning the terraine from the plane.

Exasperated at his plight, he scanned the wall above him carefully. In his haste he had ignored the easiest route, a fissure slashed across the face a few yards from where he had climbed, affording generous footholds.

He wriggled out of the packstraps and rolled over, gritting his teeth silently against the stabs of pain in the back of his head and the savage twinges in his swollen ankle. Reckless of the condition of either, he lurched to his knees, swung his pack up somehow, reached for the rifle. Then he crawled toward the fissure.

The going was far from easy. The sharp rocks threatened to slash his trousers, dug deep into his palms. The heat that had poured into the rocks during the long hours of intense sunlight came up at him in waves that threatened to melt him. Perspiration from exertion and reflected heat ran from every pore.

Yet he forced himself upward. Memories of the two dogs kept driving him. They have saved his life and his partner's more than once, and he owed them every effort he could put forth to keep them from the brutal treatment he knew the breed would mete out to them. A little exertion and suffering on his own part now might save the poor animals untold miseries under the scourge of the renegade.

Half delirious with pain and exhaustion, he crawled along, slanting up the face of the ledge. Sweat and giddiness half blinded him. He could not be sure if the roaring in his ears was the sound of the plane or the threatening gulf of unconsciousness. All he could do was muster enough determina-

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tion to keep on climbing. Concentrate on that. Get up out of the slash into which he had fallen. Get a view of the country around. Maybe spot the renegade and the dogs.

PUFFING, wheezing, panting, gasping, he crawled along. The back of his head seemed to have gone, leaving only a vague aching space where numbness was a monstrous throb that threatened to push out his eyes. That right ankle was just an enormous boil that bumped against everything and jangled pain up at him in recurring waves.

But he would not quit. He remembered how Spareribs had gone over the mountains for him in New Guinea, completing an incredible trek after help, how Huskie had held off the attacking Japs and kept them from being wiped out.

The heat from the ledge was so great that he half believed himself back in the jumbled rocks of that tropic island, that all the intervening experience had been a dream.

Then he blinked over his shoulder at the muskeg below him and brought himself back to reality.

He was almost at the top. A few feet more would bring his head over the edge.

Cautiously he removed his cap and stuck it on the end of his rifle barrel. Inch by inch he raised it, aware that it was one of the oldest tricks of such warfare, but hoping it was still good.

No bumblebee sang over. No sharp crack of a rifle announced that he had been seen. He lowered the cap, replaced it on his head, and forced himself up the rock. A minute or two later he was peering over and slowly scanning the country beyond.

The plane had gone, but he could still hear it afar off apparently still sweeping low and searching the country for some sign of the escaped man. Nothing moved in the wild expanse of rocks, muskeg, and willow fringe. Slowly and carefully he studied the farther face of the ridge he had just climbed, the rocks below the sheer drop, the mat of willows. Halfbreed and dogs had seemingly vanished.

There he saw a tiny flicker of movement in the densest clump of willows. Fighting off sickening waves of nausea and the black veils of threatening unconsciousness, which closed and opened alternately, leaving him in a mere tunnel of clarity, he peered down that tunnel at the distant sticks and leaves. Could that movement have been a hand waved to drive off particularly annoying pests, the flick of a tail plume in protest, the lift of a tortured head?

Then he saw that the thing moving was a bird, although he was too far away to determine what kind of bird it was. Wearily he swung his gaze to the next clump of willows, only to pivot it back again with a start.

The bird was not moving as if to eat. There was disquiet in those twitching jerks from limb to limb, curiosity in the cocking of the tiny head. Something in those willows was foreign to the bird's previous experiences.

Gingerly Trueman worked his foot forward. Even as he inspected the injured ankle, he kept peering at those willows from time to time making certain nothing moved there but the bird.

The ankle was only sprained, although puffed almost as big as his head. But he not could bear his weight on it. He must negotiate that descent as he had managed the climb, or stay where he was and wait for the renegade to show himself.

Lying where he was, he remained outlined against the sky to anybody in those willows. Although his clothing was blended reasonably well with the rocks, he could not move without drawing attention instantly to his exposed position. If he fired at LeMoine and missed, he would make an excellent target for the halfbreed, while the latter could drop into the willows again and be instantly concealed from view. Nor would he dare shoot at any movement among the fronds, since the crafty renegade might prod the dogs into action to draw his fire.

Furthermore, dusky twilight of the Alaskan night would be upon them soon. The muskeg was already steaming with fog that was rising and would soon hide the willows. Between fog and the duskiness of night, the murderer might escape.

Heedless of his pain, he rolled and lurched to a view of the descent that would bring him down on the side where dogs and man evidently lay hidden.

The prospects were not good. Given a rope of any kind that would bear his weight,

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he could have slipped down easily enough, but he had nothing in his equipment that would suffice. Even if he sacrificed belt and packstraps, he must drop several yards, and he had only one leg to break his fall.

The only alternatives were to remain where he was and risk having the quarry slip away in the fog or to descend as he had climbed, to crawl around the rocky barrier through the muskeg. But he might be hours making the tedious descent and the long crawl through the wet moss. Aside from the discomfits of icy water, swarming mosquitoes and painfully dragging foot, he would be risking letting LeMoine slip away during the hours he must spend making the long detour.

SEEKING some shelter, he found a jut of rock a few yards away along the crest and worked slowly toward it. The fog was rolling toward the willows, hiding everything in a gray mystery. Tiny wisps of mist already floated past where the bird twittered and hopped.

Something lurched among the willows, startling the inquisitive bird into sudden flight. Trueman hurled himself behind the upstanding bit of rock and swung his rifle.

"Tam' to hit de trail," yawned the half-breed, his voice echoing oddly from the rocks as from a sounding board. "Dat plane she gone, an' Pierre rest. No, you don' get no feed, you red-eye devil. Hit de trail."

The sealskin cracked, as a shape flailed in the careening fog. Trueman's rifle wavered, found the body from which the arm lifted and fell. Savagely he brought that flexing back into range, pressed cautiously on the trigger to insure holding his aim.

The dogs were stirring too, but they were clear of the man, flinching away from that cruel lash, whimpering as the bite tore hide. No fear of hitting them, although the range was longer than he wished and the fog made everything weirdly bigger than reality.

LeMoine lifted for another stroke, his voice a snarl of savage triumph. Trueman thought the trigger would never stop coming back, tugged at it ever so impatiently.

The rifle cracked. LeMoine pitched down into the fog, which was denser below the level of his waist, disappeared as completely as though he had plunged under water.

"Spareribs, here! Come here, boy! Come!"

Trueman's voice went out eagerly over the low-flying fog, pleadingly, commandingly. The willows thrashed. He heard the eager whine of recognition, the floundering efforts of the dog to dash off toward the sound of that familiar voice. Then the fog was slashed by fire, a bullet droned past him, and the bark of the rifle crashed at him, echoing from the ledges and seeming to drone out over the foggy muskeg into nothingness.

The crippled man hugged his rifle close, pumped in another shell, kept his sights on that spot whence the flash had come. He dared not fire blindly into the willows for fear of hitting the dogs, but he felt sure the renegade would come erect and expose himself.

SLOW minutes dragged past. The dusk thickened. The fog crept slowly up and up the bent willows, leaving only a few sticks rising from the gray blind.

Then Trueman saw the sticks moving in the direction of the muskeg. The half-breed must be crawling that way, aware that he would draw fire again if he stood erect.

The rifle swung to follow that eerie waving of the twigs, but he dared not fire. The commotion was sufficient to tell him that the dogs were being driven or hauled along. Firing would endanger them.

A head lifted above the fog, and the rifle swung to cover. But the head was down again before Trueman could determine if it was man or dog that had reared.

"Here, Huskie! Here, Spareribs!" he called. "Come, boys! Here!"

The cry carried all the old authority of army days. Striking on canine ears it brought heads up above the fog, lurching shoulders, frantically leaping bodies. But it also brought the crouched figure of LeMoine, the lashing arm, the cutting thong that cracked and bit.

The leaping, straining, struggling dogs hid the crouched LeMoine, made firing risky. Trueman could have gladly riddled the man for his brutality if he had dared take the chance of hitting the dogs, but their delight and eagerness to respond weakened him.

"Down!" he screamed, aware that his call had only brought more suffering to the

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obedient beasts. "Down, Spareribs! Down, Huskie! Down!"

The three forms dipped below the fog again. The mocking laughter of LeMoine came echoing up to him. Then the splashing went on interminably until it finally died away off yonder across the muskeg and the swirling fog.

"LOOK, Doc, you can't leave me here like this. I can walk. I tried it. I've got to get up into the mountains to find out what's happening. My pal's up there after a murderer. I can't stay here, Doc."

The scowling old face only shook in negation. Then the rheumy old eyes met the pleading blue ones squarely.

"Sedgewick, you could maybe go a mile, possibly two or three. Maybe no farther than that door. Then—"

He had been holding an arm outstretched. As he paused, he let the hand drop limply from the wrist joint.

"And it wouldn't come up again, as mine does," he added grimly.

Then hope leaped in the younger eyes. The blonde curls went back with an eager toss.

"Leave word for the marshal not to leave without seeing me," he urged. "LeMoine's probably heading for our diggings. Knows we came out in a hurry and probably guesses we cached some of the dust we had washed. He must be aiming to pick that up before he disappears. I can ride a plane, can't I, Doc? I can show them the way."

"I'll tell 'em. If they've room for you to ride with your leg in a splint, I'll lash her up and you can go. Provided they want you," he added as an after thought.

"They've got to. It's my partner, and one of the stolen dogs is mine. It's my gold he's after too—half of it."

The marshal came in hurriedly an hour or two later.

"They're gassin' up the plane," he panted. "Not much time—to talk. Where's this claim—you think—LeMoine's headin' for?"

"Beyond the Endicotts — the Brooks Mountains, you call 'em now. Up on the Arctic slope."

The marshal nodded solemnly, half turned to go. He had been in the area long before the map makers and popular usage changed the name of those coldly forbidding mountains that seemed jealous of man's penetration into their frozen wastes.

"Quite a piece?" he suggested quietly.

Sedgewick nodded, his eyes alight with hope.

"But only a few hours for a plane. We can scout around a couple of days lookin' for him—and still hop back here and pick you up to show us the spot—and be there well ahead of him. If we spot him along the way, maybe we won't need you at all."

He was gone before Sedgewick could beg to go along for the ride. The plane was already warming up her engine. Soon it was droning away in flight, leaving Sedgewick to pound his pillow in frustration.

But he did not remain idle long. A hand slid under his pillow and clutched the sack of gold dust that Trueman had brought him as a solid reminder of their success. The weight was reassuring. Quickly he slid out of bed, hobbled with one leg stiff to the closet where his clothes hung, squirmed and wriggled his way clumsily into his trousers.

Flinging open the door, he lurched his way out and toward the store, holding the injured leg stiff, putting no strain on the damaged tendon.

"When's Chic Vance due in here?" he asked eagerly, naming the most recent brush-hopping pilot doing a local freight and passenger business.

"Any time now," the old storekeeper assured him. "You want him?"

Sedgewick understood this was no idle prying curiosity but the customary willingness of the local people to help. A flier like Vance had no schedule and no ticket agents. Men like this storekeeper were his advertisement of schedule and his unofficial agents, merely to accommodate their customers and their friends. By helping to keep Vance supplied with customers they were retaining in the country a service that might otherwise go bankrupt and quit.

"Yes, I want to charter him to take me up over the Brooks."

"Gettin' as busy as the trail to a new strike," grinned the old man. "I'd be hobblin' up that way myself if I didn't have to look after things here. Folks'd starve around here if I shut up shop and took after that dirty thievin' coward. I cal'late you're the

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pardner of that black scowler what took off afoot early."

Sedgewick nodded, aware that everybody knew their story yet reluctant to tell too much of his business.

"Gossip has it," said the old man insinuatingly, "that you boys left a good bit of dust you figured was too heavy to bring along when you come out so hurried last winter. Prob'ly the skunk's gone after it eh?"

Still Sedgewick did not answer, contenting himself with staring grimly off in the direction of the mountains.

"And them was your dogs he took. Heard them dogs saved your lives for you more'n once. Guess it don't set good havin' them drug off by that breed."

"No, it doesn't," said Sedgewick shortly, limping toward the door with that leg stiff. "I'd appreciate your telling Vance I have a job for him." He halted to chunk the bag of dust against the counter with a telling thud, "And I'm not broke."

He went swinging awkwardly back and lay down without undressing. Anxiously he waited, his eyes studying every irregularity in the ceiling, his ears straining for sound of a plane.

MEMORIES of the big faithful dog kept rising to haunt him. Huskie had long been his favorite in service, and he had been allowed to retain the dog when the war ended. Now he kept recalling how those faithful eyes always sought him, how the black ears would remain erect and questioning when their eyes met, the black face eager, and how that creamy yellow ruff would suddenly stand out and the plume of tail begin to wave if he showed the slightest desire for the dog's company. Now he pictured those eager eyes as full of puzzled wonder and pain, perhaps darkening with hatred or growing sly with plans of vengeance.

For Sedgewick had no illusions about the fate of the stolen dogs. He knew how heartless the wretch who had stolen them, how utterly indifferent he would be to their sufferings.

Homely and awkward as he was, Spareribs was dear to him too, even though he was nominally Trueman's dog. That odd travesty of canine beauty had proved more than once to be the soul of dependability. Losing him to such a fate was enough to make a man clench his teeth until they threatened to crack, even if Huskie had not been dragged and clubbed to the same fate.

The roar of a descending plane brought him up onto an elbow to peer out at the skimpy landing field, but he sank back in disappointment as he recognized the plane the marshal and Corporal Dunbar were using.

A few minutes later the marshal tunked on his door and came striding in at his welcoming cry in answer.

"Not a sign of either of 'em," he blurted, scowling at Sedgewick. "Your pardner knew he was comin', didn't he? He'd pull for us, wouldn't he?"

Sedgewick was swinging out of bed again and forcing himself erect.

"How far in did you go?" he demanded.

"Twice as far as any man could go afoot. Cruised around all over. I can understand the breed's hidin' out with the dogs, if he could manage it, but your pardner—"

"LeMoine must have got him. It's the only explanation. Even if he'd lost the trail, he'd have been signaling to you. I'm going up there."

"Not afoot. Your leg won't stand it. I heard you was askin' for Vance and plannin' to fly up on your own. You take our plane and scout around. Dunbar and me'll head up there afoot. Keep cruisin' and lookin' for sign of movement beyond us. Go as far as you figger he could possibly make it, and keep flyin' low and lookin'. If you don't spot him, you'll keep him holed up so he can't go far. We'll comb the country until we find him. Plane'll be ready soon as it's light."

Dusk was falling, that dim light that made visibility poor and yet was neither daylight nor darkness.

"If you were out there trying to escape, Marshal," he asked sharply, "when would you travel?"

"Right now, I suppose, and whenever there was no plane in sight."

"Right. He's sure to take advantage of what little dusk there is. We can't see too well in it, but we can tie him down. Every mile we keep him from traveling means one mile less you've got to cover to overtake him. Even if we can't spot him in the dusk, he'll be afraid we can and will stay hidden."

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"I think you're right. We're tuckered out and need some sleep before we shove off. Suppose you go up and see what you can see."

Sedgewick hesitated. Then he turned to face the marshal.

"If you find True," he said chokingly, "take care of him. He's—he's a right guy."

He was gone before the marshal could answer, making surprising speed on that stiff leg as he swung it rhythmically. His jaw was clamped hard and his eyes were none too dry as he blinked into the gathering dusk. He knew his partner was no shrinking violet. Even if he had lost the renegade's trail somehow, he would not hesitate to signal the plane and let them know of his failure. Unless LeMoine had ambushed him, pinned him down, or—

He couldn't let himself think of the only other alternative, although it seemed the most likely one. Even if the breed had wounded him and had him cornered, Trueman could have waved a greeting, or fired his rifle.

The pilot looked up from checking his engine. The grin of welcome died on his face as he saw that swinging leg and realized who his visitor was.

"Ready to go up with me come morning?" he asked quickly.

"Ready now, if you can make it."

"Look, I'm pretty tired. Suppose I catch some shut eye for a few hours first?"

"Suppose the halfbreed's asleep right now?"

"No, but—"

"But he'll think we might be able to see him, even if we can't. He'll hole up until we leave. Then we can swing back here and you can sleep in the daytime when he'll be afraid pursuers on foot can see him."

"I'd like to," sighed the pilot, "but I'm tired and—"

"My buddie's tired too—if he's alive. My dog's tired, but they're both of 'em pushin' on, if that devil hasn't killed 'em. I'll likely be tired before this is over—but I'm sticking as long as I can. The K9 Corps couldn't fly home and rest whenever it felt tired."

The bite of those last words went home.

"A lot of us guys up aloft flew when we should have been pounding our ears, and don't you forget it, Kennel Corps. More than one crackup was caused by a pilot's being dead drunk with weariness from trying to give you guys support. But I'm not that tired yet. Climb aboard. We'll go have another look-see."

They roared off over the dusky terrain with the weird light distorting the world below them, throwing dark shadows in the deep valleys, picking out the distant icy peaks with gleaming reflections from the hidden sun, making strange intermediate lights in odd patches on the lesser mountainsides, throwing the unlighted sides into deep shade.

Sedgewick did his best to peer down through the dusk, but realized their flight was all but useless. The light was so much brighter up where they sailed than down in those depths they sought to penetrate below them that they could see little but shadowy darkness. Even the fog was mysterious to Sedgewick until the pilot enlightened him.

"Muskeg," he called, pointing. "Steams at night, after the sun leaves."

Sedgewick stared, half aware what the swamp bog meant to pursuers of the fleeing halfbreed. If that burden of fog properly outlined the dimensions of the quag, the man must leave his trail somewhere on its surface or face tortuous climbing to find his way out of the valley.

Then his body stiffened, jerking the injured leg. Was that something solid and tangible that had lifted so fleetingly above the burden of fog? It had looked like a head raised inquiringly, possibly the head of man or dog thrust up in greeting. But he could not be sure that he had seen anything. Imagination could play tricks on a man under such circumstances.

"Could you skim that fog?" he asked. "Thought I saw something."

The plane obediently banked and slid downward. Sedgewick felt his stomach pushing against his chin, but he clamped his jaws tighter and swept his gaze out over that sea of gray.

The fog was not so compact at closer sight, not so level as it had looked from above. It was really a writhing, twisting, twining series of wisps that turned and whirled like dancers, yet massed so close he could see nothing definite between the water witches.

Down swooped the plane, to level off

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and drive across the wide stretch. Wheels barely missing the fog, it sped hurriedly along, its speed seemingly accelerated by contrast with the idling vapor.

SEDGEWICK stared until his eyes were tired and relaxed only when the pilot pulled her up and away from the threatening ledges that knifed above the mists ahead of them. Then, looking back to see how narrow had been their escape, he saw that the slipstream had blown the fog away in a path behind them, a path that closed slowly, even as he stared.

"See that?" he called excitedly. "I should have been looking behind. Your prop tears a path right down to the muskeg. Want to try a swing the length of it, just to see?"

Again they banked and came down. Again the plane leveled off and sped over the gray mist. But this time Sedgewick was doing his best to discern anything that might lift above that level of mossy growth revealed by their passage.

But he could see nothing in the narrow path they left behind them. No man crouched below the level of the fog, no dog frisked—at least not in the narrow path they cut across the fen.

Again the pilot, peering ahead through the dusk in search of barriers, lifted her to avoid the rocks. Again Sedgewick broke his concentration to let his eyes blink before taking up the search again.

Then, between blinks, we saw a faint flash below. Taking bearings to mark the spot where he thought he had noted it, he stared hard. This time he saw it, plainly the flash of rifle fire. Then, before he could tell the pilot, it came again.

His heart leaped with hope. He bellowed in his excitement.

"Somebody just fired three shots down yonder. Not aimed at us. I could tell by the direction of the flash. My partner, probably. Hurt or in trouble. That's a distress signal. Can we go downstairs?"

"Are you kiddin'? In these rocks, or into the muskeg? This is a plane, not a divin' bell." Then in a less disgusted tone, "I guess I understand, feller. If I had skis I'd try it. Best we can do is stick around, take bearings, and jump back to base to tell the marshal where to look."

He swung into a long circle over the general area, while Sedgewick watched expectantly.

The rifle flashed again below them, then a second and a third time.

The pilot climbed, cut his motor, dived, and then circled several times to indicate he had caught the signal.

"Now for home," he bellowed and swung back toward Chandalar.

V

TRUEMAN felt his hope wane as the halfbreed sloshed across the muskeg with the dogs, his mocking laughter echoing back from the ledges. But he would not quit. Not while he could move.

He rolled and crawled back to the fissure up which he had climbed and began a painful and laborious descent. The back of his head throbbed and ached. His swollen ankle hindered him more as he tried to back down than it had during the ascent. Hampered by darkness and dizziness, he made slow work of it.

Yet he kept trying. Even though he could only crawl, he could follow that trail. Daylight might bring the plane back, forcing the breed to hide again, giving him a chance to overtake him, even at his snail's pace. That old one about the tortoise and the hare might be repeated here on this grim terraine.

He slipped again, but caught himself. His senses reeled, but he fought back the darkness that kept trying to close around him. He wouldn't quit. He wouldn't sag back and let somebody else finish the job.

Somehow he made the edge of the muskeg. Somehow he slung his rifle across the pack, so that he could crawl without wetting it, could even drop into the icy water and rest if necessary without immersing the weapon. Then he started to creep out around that rocky promontory in quest of the trail LeMoine and the dogs had made across the quag.

The fog shut him in, deepening the twilight, ghostly, eerie, threatening. It forced him to cling to the fringe of willows, fearful of crawling in circles if he lost his bearings in the mist. When he did lose the willows once, he forced himself up on his haunches, barely lifting his head high enough above the twisting wraiths of fog

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to see the ledge and realize that he had already swung to the left even though convinced he was going in a straight line.

Then he heard a plane.

He was sloshing in icy water halfway to his elbows, his legs immersed high above the knees, his feet mercifully numbed with the cold. But he must signal the plane, give them the direction of the breed's flight.

He swung in toward the rocks and forced himself to crawl faster. Luckily the plane was swinging, dipping, swooping down toward the muskeg. He had more time now than when he had heard it before.

He dared not try to get his hands on the rifle in that wet bog for fear of dropping it into the water. He knew that they could never hear the report above the roar of their motor. He must rely on their being able to see the flash, and the fog around him would hide that unless he could reach the rocks and scramble high enough.

The plane sped away and was lost to sight far across the fen. He almost gave up the effort before he heard it coming back. Then it was sweeping down and risking destruction again to skim the mossy growth just above the mist.

He felt the rocks before he saw them, because he was straining his head over his shoulder to watch the plane as he crawled. But he could not climb. The face was too steep. All he could do was haul himself up onto his better foot, brace against the ledge, and fumble for the rifle with icy hands.

It was strange to be bathed in sweat except for those numbed hands and feet, to be so overheated in heart, brain and body and so icy cold in those extremities. He clattered the rifle against the rocks and all but dropped it into the wet muskeg, but he caught it just in time. Then he was an age slipping the safety and getting ready to fire.

Life seemed to seep back into the cold hands as he pumped and fired. His eyes never left that wheeling plane. He knew that he was above the fog, for he could see the sky clearly and knew that any watcher from above could see the flash of fire from his rifle barrel—if only the watcher happened to be looking in the right direction as he fired.

The flash seemed pitifully weak in all that vast expanse of dusk. He tried to remember how far a single match flame was visible in darkness but couldn't recall. They had told him once, when he wanted to light a cigarette during a blackout on the trip to New Guinea when subs were close. Some incredible distance.

But this was different. The gray murk wasn't complete darkness, nor even what the radio ads called a reasonable facsimile. Besides, a flash like this was so quickly spent. A candle kept burning steadily.

He fumbled in more cartridges before he saw any indication that the plane had spotted him. Then he resumed that spaced firing. Three shots in a sequence, then a wait, then three more.

The plane banked and swung toward him. He fought himself to hold the fire for the slow count of ten before he shot again. This time they surely saw him, for they came circling directly over him.

Yet he fired three more times, delighted at their diving and continued circling before swinging away.

He filled his magazine again and stared out across the muskeg. He had given them the direction. In daylight, with this fog gone, they could easily spot the trail where LeMoine and the dogs had crossed the muskeg. Any land party following him would be saved the job of locating the crossing.

Pain and weariness urged him to stay where he was to await rescue, but he remembered the harsh voice of the breed and the crack of that thong he had wielded as a whip, the yapping and cringing of those canine bodies, the piteous yelping.

He swung the rifle onto his back again, slid down the rock against which he was braced, crawled forward in the icy water.

His hands had softened enough by soaking to be tender. The rasping moss-like growth raked tender wrists, made the backs of his hands sore. His knees ached with the cold. That trailing foot was numbed but not too numbed to feel pain when it struck a tougher tussock.

Twice he lost the ledge and had to force himself up onto his haunches to look for it. The second time the mist had risen alarmingly. He had to force himself erect on one tottering leg to peer through the swirl for seconds before he finally oriented himself and went crawling on. Then he found willows again beyond the ledge, reassuring branches that comforted his mind,

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even as they scraped across lacerated wrists and dragged against his body and jerked his injured ankle to renew the flashes of pain.

Suddenly he was at the trail that man and dogs had made. He saw the dents in the dusk but would not believe his eyes until his hands touched them. Then he crouched there and tried to decide what to do.

HE HAD looked across that muskeg and estimated the distance while high on the ledge behind. It was fully half a mile, possibly a mile. His trousers would wear through at the knees before he could make it, rasped constantly by that rough growth. His wrists were already bleeding from abrasions, although mosquitoes covered them like thin fur.

He thought grimly what a feast they would have if he remained. He might get a fire going and start a smudge, with the willow twigs for fuel and the damp moss of the muskeg for the thick smoke. But he might help whoever followed if he pushed on. The plane would be back in Chandalar by now and a party would soon be starting out after him, but the sun would soon be rolling along the horizon and drying the tracks left by man and dogs on the far side of the muskeg.

Willows fringed the other bank, but he had seen the bare rocks beyond their branches. Until the sun came to dry away the moisture, foot and paw marks would be damp on those bare rocks, revealing the direction of flight.

Certain that he could help in the eventual capture by pointing out the line of departure, he crept out into the quag.

Solid ice lay just below the few inches of moss and water. Ice that never melted, even when the sun burned down above and the heat quivered in waves across the surface. He was in no danger of sinking, but he must keep going if he once started out across that waste, for he could not allow himself to drop face down without danger of drowning in his weakened condition—even in a scant four inches of water.

"I'll roll on my back," he assured himself, "if I do go down. Pack'll hold me up enough to keep my face out so I can breathe. Just got to save enough strength for the roll, if I feel myself going."

He did feel himself going more than once during the long hours that followed. Following the trail was easy, as far as finding it was concerned for the passing of man and dogs had bent the coarse growth as feet and paws dragged, had left those telltale wells where weight had crushed the moss. He could have followed it blind, so easy were those little pools to locate. But crawling on hands and knees with a badly sprained ankle was far from easy.

When he felt the nausea increase and the blackness close, he would force his weight back against his legs, lifting head and shoulders higher. At first he could see the stars dimly above him, but the second or third time the stars were gone.

He winned with the pain of his weight against the swollen ankle, but the sensation seemed to revive him, and he bent to creep again.

His coat sleeve was fraying. His wrists were swelling. He tried keeping the weight of head and shoulders on his bent fingers, using the old lineman's trick from his football days, but they were soon raw and bleeding too.

The gnats and mosquitoes were a blur before his eyes, a dense swarm that no amount of waving and slapping could frighten away even for an instant. He could feel his face puffing from their stings, his eyes closing slowly.

Yet he went on, one slowly padding movement of his right hand, another reach with his left, a swinging forward of his weight and a painful dragging of the legs. Then another and another.

"All for a couple of mutts," he snorted. "A pair of miserable mongrels. Just plain dogs."

Time was on the treadmill with him, going nowhere in the fog. Bogged down forever in moss. Condemned to creep and creep and creep. A new corner in Dante's Inferno, a new angle on Hell.

"I should have stood in bed," he chuckled, recalling the frequent remark of a miserable draftee who had resented the New Guinea rains vocally on every occasion.

The murk grew thinner. At first he thought he was nearing the edge of the bog, but then he realized that the sun was reeling along the horizon somewhere for its long visit. Daylight was returning. Soon

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the fog should burn away under the red eye of the sun.

But it didn't. The murk grew less and less dense until it was definitely day in a complete blanket of fog. He could see scarcely ten feet away in any direction—and every foot of his view was monotonous, unending muskeg.

He gave up looking and hoping at last and just slogged onward. Once his elbows refused to hold him up, and his face and chest sposhed down into the harsh moss. But the rasp against the swollen face aroused him, forced the arms to stiffen. He resumed his crawl with a touch of terror in his heart. He must keep going until he reached the shore beyond. He might lose consciousness out here and smother in the water, much as a drunken man had smothered back home years before in a mud-puddle in a country road.

He knew his eyes were deceiving him when he saw those branches. He was never going to make those willows. Just a trick to discourage him, like the mirages desert wanderers were reputed to see before they dropped and died.

He shut his eyes to close out the vision and found he could really hold the trail by feeling. No need even to grope for the little pools. Just follow those bent fronds. Scuff and drag and lurch and wallow onward.

The contact with the branches startled him from his stupor. He grabbed a thin willow twig and tugged at it, an hysterical laugh cackling out to startle him.

But his troubles had only just begun. The muskeg had been easier to negotiate than these bent and twisted willows, which lashed and dragged across his swollen face and along the side of his body, forcing him to exert more energy in order to brush them aside. Then he saw the rocks.

He rolled to a sitting position and stared down at himself, taking inventory of his condition. The knees of his trousers were gone, completely worn through, leaving great jagged holes where gnats and mosquitoes burrowed at lacerated skin and flesh. The backs of his hands and wrists were equally torn and attacked.

The rifle was still dry. His food had escaped dunking, even when he had pitched forward, his body having been thick enough to hold the pack above the water.

Now he ate ravenously, brushing mosquitoes and midges, trying to fight off pain and weariness and discouragement enough to think.

His eyes were closing rapidly from the bites and the swelling. His hands and knees, softened by the long immersion in the icy water, would stand but little travel over those rocks. But the tracks left by the half-breed and the dogs were drying, even with the fog between them and the sun. Long before a posse could come up afoot from Chandalar, the tracks would be indecipherable on the bare rocks.

After chewing for a few minutes he shrugged off his coat and used his knife to cut it into strips with which to bind his wrists and knees. Then he discarded all that he dared from his pack, aware that every ounce would tell in the ordeal ahead, slung his rifle atop the pack, and started crawling over the rocks.

The breed was crafty. After striking straight ahead from the muskeg for perhaps fifty or a hundred feet, he had swung sharply to the left. The damp tracks revealed a full right angled turn. But Trueman was ready for the maneuver. His fumbling hands found loose rocks and heaved them from their beds. The longer ones he laid at right angles to the trail. The smaller he used as a hammer to pound enough marks along the new route to insure sign for eager eyes to follow.

Scarcely fifty yards beyond, gruelling yards that cost Trueman dearly in sweat and agony, the trail turned sharply to the right.

Again he erected a pointer, hammered out the telltale marks, and floundered on. Moccasins were drying and leaving less moisture on the rocks. Paw marks had completely disappeared. A few hours would have made such trailing impossible.

Again the right angle to the right. The man was fleeing due East now, up the long valley parallel to the muskeg. He was really traveling too, making long strides where the rocky footing permitted.

Trueman felt that this would be his last real contribution. He was too weak to crawl much farther. But the breed would probably feel his angling had made pursuit impossible beyond this last turn. The rapidly drying tracks indicated precipitous haste.

Yet he kept on. The fog still hung in a

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dense wall around him. Even when the trail led him up and up over the rising rocks, he did not lift above the fog. The entire valley was shrouded, perhaps the whole range.

The discovery gave him fresh impetus. The plane would be useless in the pursuit while this lasted, might even be tied to the ground by lack of visibility. The pursuit might easily depend on his keeping on.

Suddenly a cliff reared ahead of him, a sharp V of rock that loomed directly in his way. He stared at it for an uncomprehending minute before looking for the tracks again.

Moccasins had completely dried. He could find nothing to indicate which side of the barrier the fleeing man had gone.

Weighed down by pack and rifle, exhausted from his long crawl, discouraged at his failure to keep the trail, he slumped and lay still. He just had to rest, had to recuperate that strength he had thought inexhaustible.

But he could not rest. His mind was a mad turmoil that refused to let his body lie there. He must find which direction the trio had taken, must point the way to those coming behind.

He inched forward a few more feet, taking the right side of the ledge, searching in vain for sign, peering at the bare rocks. He was dimly aware that he was in a defile that narrowed just ahead to scarcely more than a crack through which a man with a pack must have been forced to wriggle—if he went that way.

Somehow he forced himself to the narrow spot, saw that it widened and led upward beyond, began to search for some sign of passing.

He pulled himself erect with the last of his strength and searched the rocks on either side where rifle might have tunked or pack dragged. No tiny scratch on the rock, no shred of torn cloth. Nothing.

His strength ebbed. He felt himself weakening, crumpling at the knees, slumping. He never felt his body when it struck, so complete was his exhaustion.

But hours later, with the sun hot now through the fog which still blanketed the surroundings, he knew the pain of returning consciousness, the sickening sensation of having failed.

THEN he knew what had awakened him. Far off across the muskeg he heard the barking of dogs, the shouts of eager human voices.

He lifted and strained, then shook his head and let it slump down again. They were strange dogs. He would have recognized either Huskie or Spareribs by their yelps. These were probably the native mongrels packing supplies for the posse.

Not even the thought that the posse was coming could arouse him from the stupor. The rock was soft under his cheek, as soft as a down pillow. Nothing but rocks around him and his own weary body lumped there at the spot he had thought would be crucial.

The rocks shimmered and waved before his eyes as he struggled to keep them open. His gaze focused on some tiny thing close at hand, some almost infinitesimal thing that was not rock, that waved and quivered with each snort of his breath, a mere cobweb, a—

He forced himself to concentrate, suddenly remembering there were no cobwebs in this region because there were no spiders.

The web was a hair, caught on the harsh rock, trembling at his breathing. He reached a numb and swollen hand to retrieve it, shaking in sudden eagerness.

The fumbling fingers closed at last and drew it closer. He saw the lighter end in contrast to the blacker outer extremity and recognized it with a sudden leap of delight. It was a long hair from Huskie's dense coat, torn off as his body rubbed against the rock in passing.

It might have remained invisible to the eyes of a man standing and bending to look for sign. His exhaustion had brought him down to the level where it was visible. All his struggle hadn't been in vain. He could point the way again to those who were already sposhing out of the quag and scrambling over the rocks, calling out that they had found markers, that the trail was plain.

VI

WHEN Trueman shot at him from the ledge, LeMoine felt like a trapped animal. Anger flared at the thought he must be caught again after all his efforts at freedom.

Luckily for him, the shot had come just

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as he bent forward to strike with the whip. The bullet had barely missed him, flicking his clothing as it passed. Instinct had hurled him down below the level of the fog even before he had sense enough to realize that he was attacked.

The cold water chilled his body as he splashed into it, but did not quench the fire in his brain. Hot hatred replaced the momentary despair. Freedom had been purchased at too high a price to sacrifice it now just because a rifle spat at him out of the night. Real freedom lay ahead in those vast untraveled reaches, freedom to live out his life instead of having a rope snap his neck under their accursed law.

Nothing must stop him from attaining that freedom. Not even the possibility of being shot from behind as he crawled away. Yet he loitered to discover how many were after him, if this was a single pursuer or a posse.

The voice calling the dogs by name reassured him. He recognized it instantly as Trueman's and grinned to himself in relief. The fool had come dashing off in pursuit at the discovery of the loss of the dogs. Probably he was alone and without supplies.

Out of sheer viciousness he snapped a shot in the general direction whence the voice came before lashing the dogs into subjection. That would hold the fool. If it didn't a shot from ambush somewhere ahead would stop him permanently. But there would be others after him on the morrow. The plane would be back to slow his escape while a land party followed on his trail. He must put miles behind him if he hoped to attain those vast empty reaches and the freedom he would know there.

Yanking and jerking, laying about him with the lash, he urged the dogs onward again. Their joy at the sound of Trueman's voice was short lived. That lash still bit and stung.

Yet they leaped and strained to tear loose and respond the second time he called. Not even that biting lash could keep them from answering that voice and straining against the thong that bound them.

LeMoine slipped and fell on his belly and was being tugged toward the ledge, even as he flailed at them with the lash. Then Trueman's command quieted them, halted their wild tugging. They would have sat down and panted, or lain and gasped in the muskeg, but their captor was on his feet again and lashing at them savagely, even though bent double to keep below the fog.

Bewildered, cowed, they swung off at his urging. Behind them floundered the angry breed, his back nearly broken by the necessity of bending so far forward, his thigh muscles protesting and threatening to cramp with every labored step.

"You make Pierre flee like one wounded bear," he growled under his breath, "but not you alone. If it is man to man, Pierre feenish you queeck. Follow, if you dare, scowling one. Next tam' Pierre make ambush he shoot to kill. No let you off with busted leg, like yellow haired one."

He dared to straighten enough to ease back and legs as he fled out across the mossy growth. Cold water and mosquitoes were no aggravation to a man who had spent his life in the woods. Not even the weariness of hitting the trail so steadily could daunt him. He had slept and was rested. He had food. There was water under his feet at every step. If his voice would not be sure to bring a bullet singing after him, he could sing as his forebears had on the long voyages across Canada in their canoes and over the portages after fur.

The thought of living like a hunted thing did not daunt him. In fact it added zest to living. All things around him hunted and were hunted. Only man had ceased to hunt his fellows under the hampering curse of laws. But he, Pierre LeMoine, was strong enough to laugh at their laws. He would evade these fresh pursuers even as he had shaken off the vaunted Mounted. He would drive far into the wasteland, where no law could reach. He would have himself a wife from the Indians or the Eskimos, maybe two or three. He would be too crafty for their law ever to catch up with him. He would settle nowhere for long, would move fast and far.

He was still pleased with the prospect when he reached the willows at the far side of the muskeg and fumbled his way onto the rocks. Even more pleased with his craftiness, as he completed his third angular turn, he slipped away up the valley at right angles to the regular trail, which was fully half a mile to his left.

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He had studied the formation of the rocks in that direction before the coming of the plane tied down his movements and had thought he detected a possible gap far to the eastward that would lead him north and deeper into the mountains.

Passing to the right of a rearing rock, he squeezed through a narrow gap, climbed breathlessly, and paused to look back over the fog-bound hollow behind.

His gap-toothed grin split his ugly face again at sight of that lifting fog. Then the grin broadened as he saw huge billows of mist cascading over the hills to the westward and northward like mighty waterfalls. Fog was sweeping through and over the mountains from the Arctic, fog that would cut off observation from the air, that would give him an opportunity to put miles behind him before the roaring motor of the plane made him hide again.

The dogs were reluctant to move, but he snapped the lash so close to them that they forced their bodies into action again. The rocks were harsh on paws soaked so long in the water of the muskeg. Toenails found little grip. They slipped and slid under the crushing weight of their packs. Hunger gnawed at their stomachs and contributed to their weakness. When LeMoine halted to snatch a few mouthfuls himself, they turned and faced him, menacing in spite of those biting straps tight across their jaws that would not let their fangs part for a rip at his throat.

He read the unconquerable hate in their eyes and grinned afresh.

"You learn who is boss," he cackled, jerking at their leash and threatening with his lash. "I break you or I lash you dead. You forget dat easy life you know before. You work now for what you eat."

Then they moved again, scrambling up rocky slopes, diving down into valleys, twisting, turning, driving farther and farther east and north. Half a dozen times he left the dogs tied to a rock while he went up a false pass to move a few pebbles where a foot might have accidentally rolled them, to tilt a rock just enough for quick eyes to see and note.

"Pierre, he's one sly fox," he would chuckle after each such delay. "For five minoots I spen' makin' dem sign, who follows is spend five hour an' maybe more on wrong trail. Nobody's catch Pierre LeMoine."

HOUR after long hour they went onward. The man seemed utterly tireless, even under that pack. The dogs were spent and gasping, barely able to drag themselves along. At every halt they flopped wearily and seemed unable to get up again, even under the threat of more punishment.

They came upon a brawling brook, icy cold from the glaciers above, and waded up it. Rocks made them slip and scramble, but LeMoine kept them in the water for a full hour and a half. Their pathetic efforts to drink with their mouths tied so tight shut brought giggles of ridicule from him, even when the red eyes turned up to him in pleading.

Finally he relented and loosened the strap on one dog at a time, careful to have the lash in readiness for a quick blow across the tender swollen snout if the beast snapped at him. Each was allowed to gulp a few mouthfuls of meat before the thong was again thrown in a loop around the jaws and hauled tight until it bit deep into the flesh and locked the teeth together.

Hours later, still wrapped in the fog that concealed everything but a few yards around them on every hand, they dipped into another valley where more willows grew along a stream.

"You earn a little res'," he grinned at them. "Tonight I'm take off dem pack." He built a tiny fire of dried moss and willow stems and turned it into a smudge to drive away the ever-present midges and mosquitoes. Then, after carefully tying the right foreleg of each dog back to the left hindleg to keep them from wandering far, if they slipped the leash, he untied their packs and sat in the smudge grinning at them as they stretched wearily, yawned, and instantly fell asleep.

Even the rain that started falling soon afterward did not disturb them. It did arouse LeMoine, falling on his face, dousing his smudge, bringing the droning hordes back at his exposed flesh again. But he pulled his jacket over his face, wrapped his hands and wrists, and snored again.

Then he was up with the returning light and off again. This time he bore north and slightly west. Eventually he planned to turn

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east, after convincing his pursuers that he intended hiding in the Brooks Mountains. Because he was wanted for murder in Canada, they would be sure he would not dare return to the domain of the Mounted who were so sure they always got their man. Yet he planned to do just that in time.

But first he would push up through the Brooks if he could find a gap. Since he had not fled toward the claim of the two Yankees, the police would be at a loss just where to look for him. Probably they would fly somebody in to wait for him at the diggings.

He grinned at that. He had no doubt there was gold hidden somewhere around that claim, for the men had worked hard and had left in haste on a trip where unnecessary weight would have hampered them and caused them a far more serious loss than that of the gold they had found. But gold would be of little avail to him where he was going. Indians and Eskimos would trade for it, to be sure, for the white man had taught them how much he worshipped the shining metal, but he carried something more potent than gold in his hands.

His rifle would buy him his way, his rifle and his ruthless disregard of law. Even these Indians and Eskimos had laws, their own as well as the white man's. He alone, reckless of law of any kind, could take what he pleased and come and go as he pleased. He would rule more ruthlessly than any of the savage monarchs who had once held all this country under their sway.

Delighted at the prospect, he held steadily onward. The dogs were rested and could manage the scramble better, although it was tough going. At times he had to boost them up rocks they could not negotiate with their packs, or lift them and their loads down where they dared not leap even in response to his cruel jerks on their line.

"Better I catch some mountain goat for dis trail," he chuckled. "Dey do better dan you. But we fin' easier goin' beyon' de mountain. Don' break your leg here. I need you for long tam'."

Although the dogs remembered the call of Trueman's voice and looked wistfully off toward the rear whenever they could, sniffing the light breeze for any possible scent, they could not turn back. The repeated tugging on the line that bound them to their captor kept them going. The harsh threat of that frequently lifed lash made them cringe and go on.

But they did not forget. When their packs were removed the second night and LeMoine slept, their tongues sought in vain to slip out between tightly bound jaws to rasp at the thong that held them. Teeth tried to draw apart to nip at the harsh binding, but their captor had bound their jaws too closely for even the tiniest separation of closely locked teeth.

Yet they pricked their ears in vain for sounds of pursuit, stared hopefully into the enveloping fog that clung to them, even while rain slashed through at them. Faith did not leave them, faith that their masters would follow and set them free from this heartless tormentor.

Then the cruel laugh would bring them back to harsh reality, the leash would jerk, the lash would snap.

Pads wore through on the sharp rocks and bled. Le Moine scowled at the bloody prints and threw off his pack.

"Lucky t'ing we get dis far," he grunted. "Dem track too easy to follow. But I don' lak' to stay here."

He fashioned crude moccasins for them and bound them to their feet. Then he forced them onward, heedless of their fumbling and scrambling, heartless at their limping, mindful only lest the pacs allow blood to ooze through and mark their trail.

His own moccasins wore through, but he fashioned new soles for them from hide he had stolen from the Indian he met below Chandalar. He even grinned as he stitched.

"Who can stop Pierre LeMoine?" he demanded of the empty universe around him. "Pierre, he's king of t'e Nort'. He take what he want or what he need. T'e law of t'e strong ees good enough for Pierre."

THE fog and rain had given him his chance. Untold miles of wild country stretched behind. A plane might cruise for months over him here and never find him. He could hear the motor long before the sharpest eyes could spot him. All he had to do to avoid detection was halt and force the dogs to lie still. Unless motion attracted attention to him, he was camouflaged against the countryside so that even the closest inspection from above would not reveal him.

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He broke into song now, certain that he was beyond possible detection. He sang the old songs of the voyageurs that he had learned in boyhood at the knees of the ancient men of the paddle and canoe. He improvised songs of his own, telling of his prowess in evading the law, of the reign he contemplated in these fastnesses, of the beautiful Indian maidens he would find and make his brides.

Then they came to snow and ice.

A long slow crawl up and ever up, where fog swirled over them in long tendrils, even though the sun had dissipated it far below them, brought them to sheer ice. For three days they worked along its edges looking for a way up and over.

The dogs were thin under their coats. Spareribs looked like a canine skeleton with gaunt eyes haunting a skull but scantily draped in hide and grudgingly supplied with wirey hair. Neither of them had wagged a tail in pleasure for days. They merely dragged onward at the urge of this master who knew no rest.

Then the mist blew away, revealing a gap that promised passage. The lash cracked again. They picked way up onto the ice and snow with cowering bodies and whimpering throats.

The heat of the sun softened the snow so that they sank to their bellies. The relief on their paws from the harsh contact with the rocks was soon more than compensated for by the labor of dragging themselves and their packs up that incline.

LeMoine seemed tireless. His spirits bubbled. Ahead lay freedom. The hangman would never find him here. His pursuers were lost miles and miles behind in the rocky foothills.

He imagined himself an explorer, like those ancestors who had broken their way into the vast wilderness in quest of beaver fur. There were no beaver in the wild regions he sought, but he believed there would be caribou, fox, wolves, marten. He would find meat for his stomach, hides for moccasins and garments, furs for the bitter cold. He could live like a savage king beyond those snows.

He laughed at hardships, hauled the dogs out of the small crevasses into which they plunged, clambered out himself when he fell. The cold of the snow seemed to inspire him. He drove gaily toward the gap that loomed far above.

Eventually they reached the pass and floundered through. They had topped the divide at this spot. Before them the mountains fell away northward, range after descending range, until lost in the mists that must stretch away to the level Arctic Ocean.

"We are beyon' t'e Brooks," he laughed as he slid downward, dragging the dogs after him. "Beyon' t'e law. Here Pierre is king. Come, my subjec's, come. Here is our lan'."

They slid and slipped and skittered downward, toiled up lesser inclines, wallowed for a full week through wet and clinging snow by day and lay chilled and shivering by night, huddled down into the moist depths.

Then they were blown down below the snow level and trudging across rocks again, relieved only by patches of moss.

Sight off the moss sobered LeMoine somewhat. Food was running low. He had expected to find caribou here. But the length of the lichens showed that nothing had browsed here recently. The moss was slow to develop, and this luxuriant growth had been untouched for years.

The only game he found was an occasional ptarmigan or hare. Even these were scarce, as if some plague had decimated them.

Pierre had not overfed the dogs before, but now he cut even the scanty ration. Their bowels growled incessantly. Their eyes followed his every move, begging for food.

Yet he dragged them farther and farther, heading eastward along the foothills, keeping back from the rim of the sea where Eskimos or traders might see him and report his presence.

He had no doubt there was a reward on his head. The Mounties would post one to insure his recapture. The former owners of the dogs would certainly offer another for information leading to his arrest. That storekeeper he had robbed might put on a third. Undoubtedly the radio had flung afar the story of his escape and the promise of rewards. Anyone who heard and understood the messages would be hunting for him. Safety lay in avoiding the white man and his posts. His future kingdom lay among the

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savage natives who kept as aloof as possible from the white man and his ways.

The dogs were beyond hope, beyond fighting back, beyond anything but gnawing hunger and the necessity of answering this fiend that urged them on and on. Starving, overworked, exhausted, they could only trudge wearily along, barely able to crawl, yet unable to lie down in their misery and die.

Yet something lurked in the depths of their reddened eyes that boded ill for this taskmaster if ever they could be free of his binding thongs and at him with open jaws. Dormant now because of their complete dejection, the hatred needed but a spark of energy to flare into violence at the earliest possibility.

VII

SEDGWICK returned to Chandalar in the plane well pleased with his efforts, although worried about Trueman. Nobody would listen to his insistence that he was able to hit the trail with the marshal and Corporal Dunbar. He had to console himself with the promise that he would scout with the plane just as soon as the fog lifted.

Dunbar had bought native dogs and packed them with supplies. He was certain he could overtake the renegade in time, but he was not sanguine about the capture being too soon.

People who had touched the fringes of the mountains were glum about the prospects of living off the country. Game was always scarce. Indians and prospectors alike shook their heads at any suggestion they go along.

Four men volunteered to go as far as the spot where Sedgwick had spotted the rifle fire, in case Trueman was disabled and must be brought back, but not even the rewards offered for the death or capture of LeMoine nor the generous wages the Mountie was ready to pay could tempt them into the hills.

Sedgewick watched the little cavalcade off before swinging his stiff leg into bed. He was tired, but hopeful. The marshal and the Mountie knew the country and the game of hide-and-seek after sought men. He had no doubt they would bring back the chattering wretch in time.

But worry about Trueman kept him from sleeping. Anxiety about the fate of their dogs added to his restlessness. He felt somehow guilty, even with his injured leg, at having lain there and allowed the renegade to steal their animals.

He was aroused from his doze by the light, swung eagerly from his bed, then halted to stare at the gray wall of fog that shut in everything. Even if they could take a plane off the ground in such a hopeless smother, they could see nothing below them, would be certain to crash.

Fretting and fuming at the delay, gnawed by anxiety, he did his best to be patient during the long slow hours. He tried to tell himself that Trueman must be reasonably sound or he could not have fired his rifle so rapidly. Probably the lug was uninjured and tied down in a ducking duel among the rocks, holding the breed until help could arrive and surround him.

Hobbling over to the store, he compared conjectures with those who knew something of the country. Everybody had an estimate to gauge how soon the four men should be back.

"Ought to be here now, if everything went right," insisted a trapper who knew the valley.

"Give 'em time," urged the storekeeper, cramming tobacco into his pipe and looking like patience personified. "Maybe they got a little job to do cleanin' up that wolverine before they head back. Takes time to crawl around a guy what's holed up and knows his life's dependin' on keepin' 'em back."

"Could be they left," suggested yet another. "That LeMoine could see your plane just as well as your pardner could. He'd know you would send in help. If I was him and see all that, I'd light out for wilder country before help could come in. Your pardner'd foller, wouldn't he?"

"If he could," nodded Sedgewick. "The guy doesn't quit easily."

"Then keep your shirt on. They could be a long time findin' him."

"But in that case," Sedgewick argued, "wouldn't those four men who went along come back?"

"They would if the marshal'd let 'em," grinned the old storekeeper. Then, in response to Sedgewick's quick look of inquiry, "You see, a marshal's got a lot o' power. He c'd swear 'em in as deputies, if he figgered

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the sitchyashun warranted, and make 'em go along. Good of the country and that sort o' thing."

So speculation continued and the slow hours dragged. The fog stubbornly refused to lift, even when showers of rain slanted through it, driven by a breeze.

"She's comin' over the mountains from the Arctic," sighed an old-timer. "I've seen fogs like this hold for days this time o' year —even weeks."

The prospect maddened Sedgewick. In spite of his leg he would have hobbled off up the trail if the storekeeper could have been induced to sell him supplies.

"I got a conscience," the old man insisted, spitting into a box of sand and shaking his head. "Know what'd happen to you. Doc says your leg ain't fit for the trail."

If the winter snows were on, making sledding possible, he could have bought dogs and sled and provender and ridden the trail. But the only means of locomotion over that vast track to the northward at this time of year was the primitive one of walking or the most modern one of flying. Both were denied him now.

THE long day passed somehow. He tossed and turned restlessly in bed during the hours of dusk, picturing all sorts of trouble for Trueman and the dogs. Perhaps that rifle fire had come from LeMoine, had been a bait to lure the pursuers into a perfect spot for ambush. He might have killed Trueman before the plane arrived and decided to hole up there and pick off any land party that followed.

The idea wouldn't down. He flung out of bed again and hobbled out into the fog. The village slept. He alone was stirring.

Grimly he swung toward the store. Anything was better than staying idle here. He would force the old storekeeper to outfit him, even if he had to do it at the end of a rifle.

Then he saw them and halted to stare. Four figures staggering forward down the trail, their forms enlarged in the mysterious way fog has of magnifying approaching shapes. Two of them merely shambled, but the other two were burdened with something that swayed and lurched on the stretcher.

Even as he watched, they changed places. The other two assumed the burden, relieving the carriers. He knew from the gentleness of their action that the burden they carried was alive and hurt.

Reckless of his leg, he plunged forward. Long running strides ate up the distance. No pain halted him; no weakening of the healing tendon slowed his dash. He had completely forgotten the leg in his anxiety.

"It's your pardner," called the leader, recognizing Sedgewick. "Bad used up, but not serious hurt. Gritty as all git out. Wanted us to leave him and go on."

"Just a sprained ankle and a few scratches and mosquito bites," fumed Trueman. "I'd have been safe enough with a smudge and grub."

Face and hands were puffed and swollen. His eyes were mere slits filled with his long black lashes.

"Fell, crawling over a ledge, and sprained it," he explained.

"Your knees, what's the matter with 'em?" gasped Sedgewick.

"The cuss wouldn't quit," growled the spokesman for the men. "Crawled across a mile o' muskeg and over a couple miles o' rocks, jest to make sure the marshal wouldn't miss the trail. Lucky thing he did, too. All the sign we had was the markers he'd rigged. Saved us hours o' scurryin' around. The Frenchie is slyer'n a fox. They'll have trouble follerin' him."

SEDGEWICK sobered after the elation of finding Trueman no worse off than he was. A few days would suffice to bring down that puffiness and get him back onto his feet. But the plight of their dogs was a different matter.

LeMoine was desperate to get away from his pursuers. He would think nothing of driving the animals until they dropped, of starving them to keep the food for himself, of killing and eating them if food ran low. Even the finest of the explorers had been reduced to killing and eating their dogs in such country when provisions failed, and the renegade was devoid of the finer sympathies.

Yet he was impotent to help. A twinge of pain in the back of his thigh warned him that he must not expect too much of his healing wound.

"Don't worry, Sedge," Trueman tried to grin through swollen features. "They'll get him. Mounties always bring back their man."

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But Sedgewick had been too close to the country of the Mounted to accept the commonly held belief. He knew that more than one of those intrepid men of the law had left his own bones to bleach in the wilds. Others might take up the trail and follow, determined to uphold the reputation of the force, but individuals were vulnerable to a bullet or a knife in the back or an axe in the head. Those two grim pursuers might easily be picked off from ambush. A score of things might happen.

Brooding would avail him nothing, and the fog hung too close to allow the plane to fly. He must put his mind to something else.

Limping back toward town, he forced himself to go on with the plans he had been making while lying on his back waiting for that leg to heal. He couldn't rely on the magnificent leadership of Huskie on the sledge trail in the months ahead, nor the leering grin of Spareribs to relieve the tedium of the long hard grind, but he could still figure the machinery they would need, pore over the catalogues that Trueman had ordered at his suggestion, estimate the difficulties and possibilities of starting their mining of that mother lode of gold they had left gleaming on the side of a ledge north of the mountains.

Their activities had been confined to placer work, thawing out and washing the gravel deposit caught in a basin of rock. Neither of them knew much about cutting away the gold-bearing rock, driving a shaft, processing the ore. They were faced with a multitude of problems and decisions. Everything they needed up at the site of operations must be flown to them or hauled laboriously over the snow after a long and exceedingly doubtful water trip beyond Point Barrow, where Arctic ice might crush any vessel intrepid enough to risk the voyage.

Would they be wise to fly out the ore or install stamping machinery and smelter to separate and purify it? Could they hire labor? Had they accumulated enough gold from the placer the winter before to begin operations, after paying one-third of their take to the cripple who had furnished them with the map that led them to the spot?

But, even with all these problems to solve, he could not forget entirely the possible fate of the dogs. Their canine companions had been too intimate a part of their lives to be dismissed easily. He would sit with poised pencil over unfinished estimates staring off into space, wondering what was happening up there in the mountains where men and dogs were driving in a chase that meant death to at least one of them and possibly to all.

The fog lifted at last, and he could get into the air again. They circled for hours before they saw the smudge that had been lighted to guide them.

Fresh disappointment was their lot. Although they flew as close as they dared, eagerly studying the signals of the two men at the smudge, there was no sign of LeMoine. Nor could Sedgewick find Huskie or Spareribs among the clustered dogs lolling with tongues out around the fire.

Grimly they set to sweeping the surrounding country, searching for some sign of movement, seeking the renegade and the missing dogs. Mist clung to the heights, preventing their going higher up the ridges for fear of crashing into a cliff, but they searched every valley and lower ridge for miles until gas ran low and they must head back for more.

Day after day they repeated the operation. Cost was ignored. Neither partner cared how much of their gold dribbled away in expenses if the dogs could only be located.

But the officers were having hard luck following the trail. The crafty deceptions of the halfbreed led them astray. Their supplies dwindled. Twice the plane responded to their requests that food be dropped to them before the fog and mists finally blew away one startlingly clear day and showed the anxiously searching eyes in the plane those telltale marks man and dogs had left high up in the soft snow.

Sedgewick felt sure the breed would turn westward toward their placer just as soon as he had cleared the mountains. Accordingly he drove the pilot to repeated sweeps over the barren wastes at the base of the foothills. White water brawled below them where streams of melted ice and snow plunged toward the Arctic. Broad expanses of flat and barren land lay in seemingly endless miles. Muskeg stretched away toward the sea, where they often saw stretches of blue separating that hovering white icepack from the nearby land.

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Once or twice caribou, possibly survivors from the depleted natural herds that had almost been annihilated or their reindeer cousins that had strayed from the huge herd recently driven across this region from western Alaska deep into Canada, broke from clumps of willows below them at the frightening roar of their plane and sped away, leaving the retreats they had sought in an effort to rid themselves of mosquito pests.

Eskimos stared up at them from where they fished for a supply of dog food. A trading schooner, creeping between ice and shore, fired a salute.

But they saw no sign of the fleeing LeMoine or the dogs that Sedgewick felt he would recognize instantly, even from the air.

Once he caught sight of a gray canine shape that he felt might be Huskie, and his heart raced madly at the prospect, but continued circling of the spot revealed no further glimpse of either the big dog or his companions. He was forced to concede the shape must have been a wolf.

Although they ranged as far as the placer in the infrequently clear days that followed, they found no trace of the fugitive. A man might have hidden easily back among the rocks, but in some of these more open spaces there was no cover for miles. Even if he threw himself down and forced the dogs to drop, their bulk would loom against the monotonous expanse, some twitch of canine head or tail would give them away.

They swooped low to study irregularities in the waste, spied out every moving thing they spotted, cruised forward and back from range to sea, but no sight of the man and dogs they sought heartened them.

Dunbar and marshal had finally been guided by their signals to the trail in the snow and had worked across the high pass and down to bare rocks again. But no amount of search had picked up the trail there. Moccasined feet and paws had left no scratches. The crafty renegade had kept away from dirt and gravel, had forced the dogs to scramble over the rocks with him, although easier going tempted not far off.

The crafty breed must have known they would follow by plane and eventually locate the trail he had left through the snow. Fogs and mists could not be relied on to hold off pursuers indefinitely.

TRUEMAN was able to walk again and was itching to be doing something. Daily he argued with Sedgewick for the right to go in his place in the plane. Although there was ample room for both, the necessity of flying far in their search required loading every ounce of gasoline they could possibly lift at the take-off.

"Take me up and drop me by parachute," he begged. "I'll join the marshal and Dunbar. Anything's better than hanging around here waiting."

But the officers were making no progress in their efforts to locate the trail beyond the snow. LeMoine had given them the slip as completely as though an avalanche had driven down and buried him.

Then fog came in again, a massive gray wall that rolled steadily southward from the ice to the northward, blotting out everything.

Before the wall reached the officers, the plane swept over and dropped a fresh supply of food. Signals told them that the men afoot were discouraged in their efforts to trail further. The pursuers would give up the chase for the time being and head northward to the coast. Somewhere along the stretch between Midway Islands and Herschel they would find Eskimos and traders. They might pick up information there from somebody who had sighted the renegade or had crossed his trail and could tell which way he was heading.

"He'll be runnin' low on supplies," Trueman grunted. "Have to head for an Eskimo village or a trading post or starve."

Sedgewick did not answer. He was thinking of the alternative a starving traveler in those barren wastes would resort to before he would starve himself. The dogs would no longer be essential as carriers if supplies were exhausted. Unpalatable as their flesh would be in a state of semi-starvation, they would be sacrificed unhesitatingly if needed.

(*Part II in the next* SHORT STORIES)

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The Feds Don't Think—All They Believe Is Evidence

MURDER IN THE MOTHBALL FLEET

By STEVE HAIL

THE first ragged banners of fog were sucking in over the coastal hills, soiling the climbing moon, when Lafferty tooled the work launch in alongside the lifeless bulk of the Liberty ship *J. C. McComber.* The launch's lone passenger, waiting in the lee of the spray dodger, got to his feet, swaying a little against the rocking motion of their wake. He was graying and stooped a little, with tired eyes, like a shoe clerk after a Saturday

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sale, but he made a pass at the pilot ladder hanging overside and hooked it the first time. Most of Lafferty's passengers—when he was lucky enough to have passengers—didn't.

Except for the rattle of the ancient gas engine and the whisper of water past the hull, the five-mile run up Suisun Bay from the river town of Martinez had been a silent one. Lafferty worked his big shoulders around in the confining stiffness of his peajacket and tried again. "Frisco weather," he said. "It'll be thicker'n curdled cream up here in an hour. And lonely. I can think of better duty than watchman in the mothball fleet."

The man, whose credentials had identified him as Malloy, grunted. "You the Inquiring Reporter? A buck's a buck, isn't it?" He got a foot on the first rung of the ladder and glanced aloft. "Say, where's the guy I'm relieving? A twelve hour stretch in this graveyard ought to be long enough for anybody." The sound in his throat could have been a laugh, but it didn't quite come out that way when he added, "Maybe he died or something."

Lafferty didn't smile. He said pleasantly, "Maybe he did at that. Name was Henzel. He wasn't around when the dispatch boat came by for the noon check-up. They couldn't find him." He shrugged. "Of course there's fourteen ships in line K here. Maybe he's just wandering around looking for souvenirs." He rubbed a finger across one arched eyebrow. "They claim this duty's tough on the nerves though, especially if you're a wino like Henzell appeared to be. Maybe he stumbled into a snake pit and took a running dive over the side to get away." He raised the other eyebrow. "But then a buck's a bucks, isn't it, Mac?"

Malloy's foot fell back to the deck. He glared. "I'm no wino, Skipper. And there's nothing wrong with my nerves." He started up and the rungs rattled against the shell plating like wind-blown shakes on a deserted house.

Lafferty watched him climb. It was a tough haul. Malloy was no acrobat, but he did all right. He looked like any one of a dozen watchmen that Lafferty knew, yet he was somehow different. There was a hard cool confidence in the way he handed himself up the ladder, and in the line of his jaw as his head angled upward toward the dim bulwarks high above him.

Maybe too cool and confident, Lafferty thought. He wondered about that. Some of these hulks had been looted clean of everything that wasn't welded down—and some things that were. There was Henzel now. For an old coot he had seemed cool enough, too, even if—

LAFFERTY shrugged. What the hell? The worry was the Maritime Commission's. It would all come out in due time. Within the current fiscal year, he guessed, if he knew the government. Probably the snakes and the loneliness had got too rough and Henzel had taken the easy way. Others had done it before him. Yes, it was something as simple and explainable as that. And as for Malloy—well, the Commission had vouched for him and that was that. It was no concern of John G. Lafferty's. He just picked up an occasional job such as this and was glad to get it. It wasn't much of a living really, but it was better than going to sea. Anything was better than that. He grinned. Well, almost anything. He guessed maybe he could leave the minor mysteries and the personnel headaches to the Commission. They were paid for it. He, Lafferty, wasn't.

He kicked the mill astern, swung wide to pick up the full force of the ebb boiling down across the Suisun shallows and looked back at the *McComber*. There was nothing or no one in sight. Just the moonlight highlighting the great rust-eaten scars on her battered flanks and the night wind sighing in what was left of her rigging. That was all. A momentary pang of nostalgia hit him, seeing the old hooker here, left to rot out her remaining years with the other outcasts of the lay-up fleet. He had made a trip on her himself not much more than a year past, but already, though he knew she'd been warped into her moorings only yesterday, she had the look of an ageing and cast off harlot about her. She had been a good ship, Lafferty remembered, as ships went. At least no worse than most.

The moment passed and he pulled the collar of his jacket up around his square neck and pointed the bow fender toward the lights on the railroad bridge that spanned the river just above Martinez.

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There were no lights on the bridge though, by the time he got there. There were just streamers of mist curling around the anchor piers, and the raucous blast of the diaphone on the middle span tearing the night apart. He left the horn to port and headed for the south shore, guided by the oily stench blowing off the refinery wharf above the public dock. A few moments later a neon sign on the shore made a bloody wound in the darkness. The sign said: "Tiny's Place." Lafferty sighed his relief and told himself that the government ought to subsidize some of these waterfront cafés. They made fine aids to navigation.

He tied up, killed the engine and doused the running lights. After nudging a couple of fenders over the side he hoisted his stocky frame up onto the dock. Coffee at Tiny's, though not good, would be hot, and welcome.

THERE was a car parked on the far side of the road fronting the dock. Its lights were off. There were two figures in the front seat. The door opened as Lafferty started to pass and the man behind the wheel got out. He wore a Homberg hat and a tight smile. Neither one looked good on him. A soft felt, pulled low, would have done more for his eyes, but not much. They were small and hard, like wet pebbles on a tide-washed beach. The man said, "That your boat just come in, Joe?"

Lafferty stopped. He'd always thought of Hombergs as going either with New York brokers or diplomats. The face beneath this one didn't belong to any broker. Or New Yorker. It had a lump of a nose, flattened from an old break and as far as geography went it looked like Frisco, south of Market. 'Way south. Butchertown maybe. Lafferty said, "Yep."

"We want to charter it, Joe."

"John," Lafferty said. "It's not a nice night for a boat ride."

"It's as good as any. You know a Liberty up there in rotten row, just in from the Orient? Towed up there yesterday."

Lafferty drew in a breath, but he might as well hear the other say it. "The row is full of Liberties, Mac."

The man said it, his small eyes brittle. "The *J. C. McComber*. There's fifty bucks in it for you."

"You couldn't see your fingers in front of your face up there now. Nope, not for fifty bucks—or the crown jewels."

The man's lip, what there was of it, curled. "What's the matter? You chicken?"

Lafferty said, "Just cautious. There's a lot of water in Suisun, but it's spread pretty thin. You miss the channel and you'll stay there a while—on one of the thin spots. Anyway, you got to have permission. That area is all restricted. The Coast Guard keeps it that way. You got a pass from the Commission?"

The man put his hand in a coat pocket and brought it out again. It held an automatic. A big one. Lafferty sighed. The man was no diplomat either. He'd never trust a Homberg hat again.

Flat-nose said, "This is my ticket, Joe, and you just passed up an easy fifty. Now, you'll do it free. Turn around and get back to your boat." He half turned toward the car and said out of the corner of his mouth, "C'mon, Al, we'll—"

The diaphone on the bridge a quarter of a mile upstream cut loose, drowning the rest of it. Lafferty didn't wait to hear it repeated. He spun and clubbed downward at the gunman's wrist with the edge of his right hand. The gun belched flame, its sound lost in the echo of the foghorn, and Lafferty let go a Sunday with his left and felt the knuckles rake bone beneath the flesh of the other's jaw. Flat-nose grunted and went down. Lafferty didn't wait to find out about Al. He heard, "Le's go, Hymie!" from inside the car and he ducked and ran. When he felt the gravel of the road shoulder under his feet he leaped in a long flat dive into the ditch beyond it.

When he rose to his knees the car was already moving away, its motor an ascending roar and leaving the smell of scorched rubber behind it in the wet air.

Lafferty walked the half block to Tiny's. It was on the wrong side of the road for through traffic and all alone. After midnight now, it was empty except for Tiny Kimbrough and a girl sitting alone at one of the tables at the far end of the room. She was wearing slacks, Lafferty saw, a short camel's hair coat, a beret and shadows under her eyes. Her hair was ash blonde, natural, and she had pale eyes, probably

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gray. Lafferty's glance took in that much and went past her. Tiny's was only a few miles from Camp Fitzhugh. The soldiers—and the girls—sometimes got down this far.

Kimbrough was washing scarred silverware in the sink behind the counter. He was a huge hulk of a man, fleshy but still young enough so that it hadn't gone too fat. He looked at Lafferty and at the dirt on his woolen shirt. He straightened, fingering suds from his enormous forearms. "You been taking off overland with that pot of yours?"

Lafferty sat down on one of the stools. He tried a grin but it wasn't much. The mirror facing the counter told him that. It told him, too, that he had an open face, homely, with dark eyes almost black and with heavy straight hair to match. He remembered that when he had shaved this morning his cheeks had been tanned and weathered. They were still weathered.

He looked at the half inch of molten tar in the bottom of the Silex. He said, "I could use a drink, but I mean a drink."

Tiny said reproachfully, "You know I got no license, Johnny." He hesitated, glancing at the girl. "But I got a private pint, and Lord knows you look like you need it." He measured a couple of inches into a coffee cup from a bottle under the sink and set it on the counter. "Fog's thick, huh? You have trouble coming down?"

Lafferty lifted the drink with a hand that was still shaking. He said, suddenly weary, "Nope, all my trouble comes when I'm ashore, seems like. A guy ought to stay at sea where he belongs. You stand your watch, you draw your pay. No trouble, no nothin'. My shipping card's still good. I think I'll catch me a nice coastwise freighter and—"

He stopped then, aware that the girl was coming toward him. He started to say, "I'm broke, sister," then caught himself in time and really saw her for the first time. The slacks weren't too tight, he noticed, but they was nicely filled. And there was nothing wrong with the shape of the sweater showing behind the unbuttoned coat. She had a nice full mouth, but the lipstick was thin, as if she'd been chewing on it. Her eyes were gray all right, he saw now, and flecked with amber. They looked tired.

Tiny said, "This is Miss Wilson, John. She was waiting for you."

"Me?" Lafferty set down the drink.

The girl said, "I'm Donna Wilson." Her mouth opened a little in a nice smile, not at all practiced. But it was expectant.

Lafferty didn't get it. He said, "Wilson?" vaguely.

SHE sat down on the next stool. Tiny Kimbrough went back to work on the ten-cent silverware.

"My brother is Les Wilson. He was third mate on the *McComber*. He's been with Oceanic several years. I've heard him speak of you."

Then Lafferty remembered. He said politely, "Oh, yes. A nice kid." He grinned at the girl. "It seems to run in the family." Then the past tense she had used hit him. "Was?" and he laughed immediately, at himself. He was getting am jumpy as some of the watchmen up at Suisun. Naturally the crew had been paid off within the last couple of days. A special lay-up gang took care of the graveyard moorings. Wilson would have been transferred to another ship by now, or more likely renewing old acquaintances along 'Frisco's Powell Street. Barkeeps had always been a seaman's best friends.

The girl said again, "*Was*, Mr. Lafferty. We haven't seen him since the *McComber* docked after clearing quarantine. That was three days ago. Mother and I have an apartment together in San Francisco. He's never failed to come home the first thing he got in. Or at least telephoned. He—" Her white even teeth were working on the lipstick again.

Lafferty said, "He's probably having himself a brannigan. It's a long dry haul from Shanghai." He hadn't wanted to say it. Les Wilson, from what little he knew of him, wasn't that kind of a youngster. But it was better than blurting out the thought that had first flashed to his mind. That was the fact that maybe Wilson, too, had met up with Hymie and Al, and hadn't been so quick—or lucky—as John Lafferty.

For the first time he began to wonder about the *J. C. McComber*. Maybe she wasn't such a good ship after all. Maybe, too, Henzel hadn't had the meemies and said the hell with it and jumped over the side. And Hymie's interest was certainly more than that of a tourist. Tourists didn't throw fifty-dollar bills around — along

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waterfronts, anyhow. Or try to highjack boats.

The girl was talking again, the thin edge of fear in her voice recognizable for the first time. "It isn't like Les. He knows mother and I worry about him. I realize it's silly, but— Well, this proves it, doesn't it? And he hadn't been paid. He couldn't be making the rounds without money. The captain hasn't seen him since before the purser paid off the crew. Why, he hadn't even packed his clothes. The Shipping Commissioner hasn't heard from him, or the company office."

Lafferty fingered the cup with the liquor in it that he hadn't touched. He tasted it now. "The cops," he said. "The police would be your best bet."

She nodded, frowning. "I went to them. They said it wasn't in their jurisdiction. It was a federal affair. I called the Bureau of Investigation. They promised to look into it and told me not to worry. Meantime, to fill out form—"

"I know," Lafferty interrupted. "Number 10472 or something. In triplicate and notarized. Then when the next session of Congress authorizes an appropriation— Hell!" He had a sudden thought. It wasn't anything to be proud of. You didn't have to be a J. Edgar Hoover to figure out that there was something on the *McComber* of more than casual interest, but— "What kind of cargo was she carrying, do you know?"

"Why— why, none that I know of. She came home in ballast. Light, don't you call it? She had engine trouble of some sort and the company found it was too expensive to repair, so they decided to lay her up for good. Les told us about it in an airmail letter from Foo Chow just before he joined her."

Lafferty looked at her sharply. "Foo Chow? He joined her in the Orient then?"

The girl nodded. "He was on one of the other company vessels. The *McComber's* regular third had an accident or something, and they flew Les down just before she sailed. That's not uncommon, is it?"

Lafferty shook his head. "No, I guess not." After a moment he added gently, "Just where do I fit into all this?"

THE girl's shoulders lifted helplessly. "You don't, of course. It's just that I couldn't sit home waiting, doing nothing. The captain happened to mention your name, said you were running a boat of your own up here. So when I learned the *McComber* was to be tied up at Suisun I thought that maybe—" Her eyes were suddenly bright and liquid at their corners. "—well, I thought you might have run onto something."

Lafferty said, "No, not exactly, but—" He stopped then, wanting to tell her about his experience of a few minutes ago, yet dreading to see the tears that were on the verge of breaking. He thought, too, about the *McComber* and a young third mate who maybe had had temptation pushed his way. The ship had no cargo so it could be a little wholesale looting, or— He had it then. It was dope, of course. It couldn't be anything else. Opium probably. A thing to tempt older men than Wilson, and wiser. Lafferty had seen it happen before. A chance for some quick and easy money. But something had gone wrong. Just what, he couldn't guess. He—

Tiny Kimbrough, his back toward them, wiping knives and forks, slowed and stopped and one of the pieces clattered to the floor. He let it lie there. Lafferty looked up. Tiny was staring at something in the mirror, his heavy jowls working soundlessly. Lafferty turned.

Hymie and the other man, Al, stood in the doorway. Flat-nose's little eyes were very bright. Al's were expressionless. The unlighted cigarette dangling from his thin lips wasn't. It said that he was a very nervous young man, or impatient, or both. He had a gun in his hand.

Hymie wasn't wearing the Homber now. He was carrying it in one hand. It only partially hid the automatic that he was holding in the other. It was still as big as ever and it was pointed at Lafferty.

"Hello, Slugger," Hymie said. "You ready for that boat ride?"

Lafferty felt the sweat starting below his hairline. He said, "You're not playing this smart. I phoned the cops."

"He phoned the cops, Al," Hymie said, but his eyes never left Lafferty. Neither did the muzzle of the gun. "No, Joe, you never phone no cops, because this two-bit beanery don't have a phone. We checked on that before we began waiting for you. And we

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been up the road watching to see if anyone heard the shot. Nobody did. You ready?"

Lafferty wet his lips. "There's other boats along the front. They'd be glad to earn an honest dollar. Any kind of a dollar, even. Why pick on me?"

One corner of the gunman's mouth lifted. "We like you, Joe, that's why. And you're working for free. Remember? Besides, nobody's seen you come in but us. Us and these people here. That makes it all very cozy. They'll go along too. It'll make a nice little party."

Lafferty made one last try. "Look, a guy'd need a crystal ball to find his way up there in this soup. Suppose I got lost?"

Hymie shook his head as if he was reasoning with a stubborn child. "Joe," he said softly, "you won't get lost. 'Cause the only chance you got of living is to find the *McComber*, quick. And that goes for Fatty there, and the skirt. Okay?"

Lafferty, his hand still gripping the heavy mug, debated using it. It could crush a man's skull if— But it was a big if, and he knew it was no good. He wouldn't have a chance. He raised it slowly to his mouth instead and drained the whiskey in one gulp. It wasn't the best—Tiny's never was—but it tasted good, the way anything will when you know it's going to be your last for a long time. Maybe a very long time. He got to his feet. "Okay," he said.

"Now, that's my boy," Hymie told Al admiringly and he stepped forward and wiped the barrel of the automatic along Lafferty's jaw in a short vicious swipe. Lafferty stumbled backward but didn't go down. He felt blood, warm and wet, coursing down his neck where the front sight of the gun had laid his cheek wide open. He heard the girl draw in her breath sharply and Tiny's muttered curses. He stood there, staring dumbly at the gunman, his fingers brushing unbelievingly at the welling blood.

Hymie touched his fingertips to the bruise purpling his own jaw where Lafferty's fist had landed a half hour earlier. He said, "In the second round, Slugger, you don't look so good." He held the door open and motioned with the gun toward the damp void of blackness outside. Kimbrough went first, mumbling to himself and shrugging on a coat over his apron. The girl followed, quiet and wide-eyed, and then Lafferty.

The launch was still waiting where he had left it. He had found himself hoping that the surge from some passing vessel might have torn it loose, leaving it to drift away on the tide. The loss, he thought grimly, wouldn't have been too hard to bear, but it didn't look as if this was his lucky night.

HE ROLLED the engine over and it came to life with a dry rattle of tappets in need of adjustment. It would, Lafferty thought, recalling the times when it had taken everything short of a major overhaul to get it started. He looked up to find the girl's eyes on his own. She was working on her lower lip again, but she tried a smile. It wasn't too good. He found himself thinking he'd like to see that smile sometime when she didn't have to work on it so hard. It appeared now as if he'd have to wait.

Kimbrough and Al were on the dock, ready to cast off the lines. Al bent over to lift the bight off a bollard and it must have looked like opportunity with brass knuckles to Tiny. He clubbed downward with his huge fist, catching the little man where his head joined the neck. Al collapsed like his legs had been scythed out from under him. Tiny fell after him, scrambling and groping like a clumsy bear, trying to get his fingers on that scrawny neck. The gunman was fast, even with the rubber in his knees. As he went down he was twisting, rolling, cursing, fumbling the gun out of his pocket.

Lafferty heard himself crying a warning and then there was a jet of flame in the mists, a rocking blast and the smell of burning powder. Tiny half turned toward the boat, his round eyes wide and the layered fat of his jaws quivering. Al fired again, coldly and deliberately. Tiny took a step, tried another and stumbled and sprawled to the rough planking of the wharf. A dark stain that hadn't been there before, was spreading across his soiled apron.

Lafferty had one foot on the rail, his legs gathered under him, when Hymie said behind me, "Unh-uh, Joe!" and he knew without looking that the other's gun was backing up the order.

Al got to his feet, swiveling his head and rubbing the back of his neck. His knees were still liquid. He looked down at the cafe owner, then at Hymie. Nobody said anything, but Lafferty could almost feel

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Hymie's nod. Then Al rolled Kimbrough over once toward the edge of the dock. He hooked both hands in the big man's belt and lifter him over the stringerpiece and let him drop. There was a muffled splash like a sodden rope fender cut adrift as the body hit the water. There was silence then, except for the sullen complaint of the engine and the mournful dirge of the horn on the bridge's center span.

Lafferty sat down abruptly and twisted himself toward the rail. He knew he was going to be suddenly and violently sick. Vaguely, from inside the covered cockpit, he could hear the girl's uncontrolled convulsive sobbing.

After a while Hymie said, "No more Flash Gordon stuff, Joe. I don't like interruptions. Now get this stinkpot moving."

Lafferty said viciously, "Friend, along about now you couldn't keep me from it!" but he said it to himself. He got up and went into the tiny pilothouse and put the boat in a tight circle, straightening finally for the diaphone on the bridge.

Hymie watched every move carefully. "Just in case," he told Lafferty, "you don't come back with us, I want to know how to run this bucket."

WITH the horn abeam to starboard, Lafferty swung left and cut his speed, feeling his way upbay for the first of the mooring buoys. The tide, he knew, was nearing maximum flood. It would be setting them crabwise toward the shoals, so a compass course wouldn't do them much good. He alerted all his sense for whatever might turn up ahead, then settled back to try and make sense out of the whole screwy mess.

Now that he had time to think it over, the opium business didn't sound too logical. That was a thing that went with Charlie Chan movies and comic books. There was still a traffic in dope of course, but the Customs knew pretty well what was going on. They didn't miss much and the little that did get through was just that—little. Stuff, usually, that could come ashore taped to a man's leg for instance, or under his arm. If there was dope on the *McComber*, there was no reason it couldn't have been got ashore before this.

The looting theory didn't stand up too well either. The ships were pretty well stripped before they were sent up the graveyard. Anything of value left aboard was mostly machinery and fittings, heavy stuff and bulky. It could be handled, of course, given time, good planning and proper equipment, but it was certainly nothing that a couple of gunsels could hope to lift in an evening's work, especially with a small launch the size of this one.

Then there was the Henzel angle. Was the old watchman just a Howard Street wino out to sober up the hard way and at the same time pick up a few easy bucks, or was he in this caper with Al and Hymie? And there was Malloy, too. Lafferty dismissed him quickly. The Commission had okayed him, and after all they'd be certain to check on a man's past record to some extent at least. No, he was just a big surly Irishman, too lazy to work and to dumb to be scared.

And young Wilson. If the dope theory was out, where did he fit in? Lafferty shook his head. It was a puzzle, all right. He hoped he'd be around to read the answers in the papers tomorrow or the next day. Instead, it looked as if somebody else was going to be reading the headlines. Something like: "Local Boatman and Unidentified Girl Found Dead In Bay."

A FREIGHT train rumbled over the bridge half a mile or so astern, cutting in on his thoughts. It brought with it the faint odor of exhausted Diesel oil. Even that smelled good to Lafferty. When it had passed, there was the muted burble of tide against metal from up ahead. Lafferty cut the engine, listening and straining his eyes, trying to locate the sound. He saw it then, the black nun buoy close aboard, and beyond it the first tier of vessels, a dozen or more lashed side by side, looming out of the fog like a mountain range at moonrise. For the first time this day he knew he had been lucky. The rest was just a matter of following the line of outboard ships northward till they came to line K. He opened the throttle a notch.

Something hard pressed against his spine and Hymie said, "No funny business, Joe. If there's at watchman aboard, I'll do the talking." He didn't sound as if he expected a watchman.

Lafferty was getting tired of being prodded with a gun, but he said, "Silent John,

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that's me." It wasn't much of a crack, but it was the best he could do. He concentrated on finding the *McComber*.

It was there, all right. It hadn't gone anyplace. And Hymie was right. There wasn't any watchman. At least no one challenged them as they pulled in alongside the ladder. Lafferty thought again about Malloy. Probably the Irishman was flaked out on the skipper's settee, asleep. Providing, that is, he wasn't in this thing with the gunmen. The Commission, Lafferty thought bitterly, ought to boost the going wage a buck or two and hire somebody who could stay honest, awake or sober. All three qualities would be even better.

There were lines, fore and aft of the ladder, hanging from the freighter's rail. Lafferty tied up, got a flashlight and a wrench from a drawer and opened the hatch over the engine. "She isn't hitting right," he told Hymie. A couple of well-aimed blows from the wrench, he knew, would fix the engine proper. Proper, so that the gunmen could never get it started when the time came to leave.

Hymie said, "She's hitting swell. I like it that way. Get away from it."

Lafferty shrugged and pocketed the flashlight. He went forward and kicked one of the launch's mooring lines over the side, letting it trail aft in the current. "Something to grab at," he said, "in case you have to leave in a hurry and you miss the rail on the way down."

"Nobody's in a hurry. We got the rest of the night. What we're after, won't take long. Providing we get your help, that is. You will help us, won't you, Joe?" He winked at Al. "Joe is a smart boy—I think. He will help us." He jerked his chin at the ladder and Al started up.

Hymie turned to the girl. "You're next, sister."

She looked at the ladder, then at Lafferty. He wished he could do something about that look, but he knew he couldn't. Not yet, anyway. He said, "It's not as bad as it looks. Keep your body flat against it and take one step at a time. Don't look down."

She put a tentative foot on a rung, waited for it to steady and started the climb. Lafferty watched her disappear over the rail finally, then Al's face—and his gun—appeared over the bulkwarks above them.

"All right, Slugger," Hymie said.

Lafferty followed the girl, the gunman close on his heels. Once, halfway up, he thought about letting himself slide backward and chancing a kick at Hymies' head. It might do, but it could work both ways. Al could pick him off like a crow on a dead limb. That would leave the girl alone, and actually solve nothing—except for Hymie and himself. It looked like a poor solution. He kept on putting one foot after the other.

When they were all on deck, Hymie nodded toward an open doorway, yawning black against the gray steel of the deckhouse. "You first, Joe. We'll talk things over. The third mate's quarters are on the next deck, second door up the alleyway. That'll do for a start."

LAFFERTY switched on his flashlight and stepped over the weatherboard. The passageway was already damp and musty and his heels clanged hollowly on the steel deck, pacing the hammering of his heart. The whole miserable business beat him. Up till now he had supposed that he and the girl were just along for the ride. He had had a boat and the gunmen wanted to use it. He, Lafferty, was just part of the equipment. Now, he had his doubts. There was something else behind Hymie's selection, something personal that— It hit him then, abruptly and clearly. They had learned someplace that he had made a trip on the *McComber* at one time. They believed he had some knowledge that would help them in whatever they were looking for. He couldn't imagine what it was, but——

He was at the door of the third mate's room then and he stopped. The door was open. The opaque light of the fog-veiled moon washed through a porthole. It didn't show much. The flashlight did better. The beam picked up the details one by one. The place was a shambles. The desk, ordinarily bolted to the deck, had been uprooted. A filing cabinet had been overturned, its drawers scattered amongst a litter of papers. The linen locker was hanging from one hinge, its plywood walls axed in. Even the oak bunk frame had been ripped apart and the mattress was a lumpy heap in a corner and—

That's when the light in his hand wavered, fell slowly to his side, raised again almost against his will and steadied. The

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heap wasn't the mattress after all. It was Henzel. The watchman was lying on his side, his knees doubled under him and lying very still. His faded eyes were wide and staring and unseeing. He was dead.

Lafferty heard the girl behind him draw in a great sobbing breath. He put a hand on the door coaming to steady himself and felt the warmth of her body pressing against it. Another time he knew he would have liked it. Now, he looked at what had been Henzel. There was nothing mysterious about the cause of his death. No plastic daggers, no breath of strange oriental poisons, no minute puncture wounds. Just a bullet hole in the head over one eye, and a winding rivulet of dried blood across the deck plates. Very simple and very messy. Lafferty shuddered.

Hymie made the sound in his throat that passed for a laugh. He said, "Nasty, but necessary. He got in our way. Don't make the same mistake, Joe. Get inside." He went over and switched on one of the battle lanterns bracketed on the bulkhead. The batteries were old and the dim light didn't make things look any better.

Hymie hooked one leg over the capsized desk, letting the gun hang loosely in his fist. "Now, Joe, let's suppose you were a Customs man looking for contraband. Where would you start?"

Lafferty said, "What contraband?"

"I'm asking the questions, Joe. Where would you look?"

LAFFERTY let his eyes take in the details of the wrecked room. He tried to avoid looking at Henzel. "If you've done this well everywhere, I don't see how you could miss much."

Hymie walked forward deliberately and smashed his fist across Lafferty's mouth. "That's only the beginning, Slugger," he said softly. "You know these Liberties. Especially this one. Now start talking, if you want to keep your teeth. Where would a guy —a third mate, say—hide something that he didn't want anybody to find? You know any false bulkheads or something?"

Lafferty licked at the blood starting from one corner of his mouth and waited for his eyes to come back into focus. He said nothing. It wouldn't do any good. He didn't know of any false bulkheads on the *McComber*. Or any other Liberty, for that matter.

Hymie drew back his fist again. Lafferty said, setting himself, "You're wasting your time. These are steel ships, all steel. It would take a gang of shipfitters and a welding crew to plant any phony compartments. Anyhow, I don't know anything about it. And a guy can take a lot of punishment when he doesn't know anything."

The gunman's lip curled. "That's what that young punk Wilson said, until—" The girl's cry stopped him. She twisted away from Al and started for Hymie, her hands curling into impotent fists. There was color in her cheeks now, and a savage brightness in her eyes. "You— you filthy murdering dock rat! You—"

Al reached out and grabbed her wrist and jerked her backward. Her shoulders landed squarely against the bulkhead, knocking the breath out of her. She stood there, hands flat against the paneling, moaning softly, staring at the gunman.

Lafferty felt the skin crawling over his knuckles, tightening, and he bunched his thigh muscles, suddenly eager to get it over with.

Hymie pushed his gun forward, jamming the muzzle into Lafferty's belly. "Don't try it, Slugger!" He put the heel of his free hand under Lafferty's chin and shoved. Lafferty staggered backward, nearly falling as one of the desk drawers tangled his feet.

THEN Hymie was talking again, addressing Lafferty, but looking at the girl. His eyes were half shut, his lips thin and pale. "So that's the way it is?" He nodded to himself. "I should've guessed it. Al, I'm slipping. Joe here is right. A man, when he puts his mind to it, can take a lot of beating. Dames, as I remember, don't do so good." He stepped to one side of the door, his back against the jamb. "Take her into the next room. We'll see how much she can take—or Joe here, when he listens to it."

Another voice, outside in the alleyway, said evenly, "Don't anybody move," and Malloy stood in the doorway. He still looked tired and a little stooped like a clerk after a bargain sale, but his voice was flat and crisp and businesslike. His left hand, steady, unshaking, palmed a leather case. It was open, velvet lined, and framed a gold

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shield gleaming dully in the half light. It was beautiful. His other hand held something uglier, but even more convincing. It was his service revolver, short-barreled, though Lafferty couldn't be sure, because the muzzle was buried, pressing hard into Hymie's kidney.

"Federal agent," Malloy said. "Just drop the guns where you stand."

Hymie let out his breath. The automatic dropped to the littered deck. Lafferty picked it up. Al, his mouth corners twitching, didn't move.

Lafferty looked at Malloy. The federal man nodded.

"Okay, Skipper."

Lafferty went over to Al. The little man seemed paralyzed. He still clung to the gun. Lafferty slapped him once, open-handed and hard, across the face. Remembering Tiny Kimbrough, it was a pleasure. The gun clattered to the deck. Lafferty put it in his hip pocket.

Malloy said, "Now, we'll tie up some loose ends." His eyes flicked over the huddled heap in the corner, and then to the girl standing unmoving against the bulkhead except for a faint trembling of her lower lip. "Maybe the next cabin would be better," he said gruffly. "After you, Hymie."

The second mate's room was in better shape, though not much. Malloy took his place near the doorway and said to Lafferty, "Start at the beginning, Skipper. From where you dropped me off here."

Lafferty told him. When he had finished, Malloy grimaced. "Well, it's worked out all right, I guess. Except for Kimbrough. Henzel got it yesterday when these loogans were up here tearing things apart. We didn't expect them back. Anyway, it's hurried things up a little. There's an All Points out for them, of course, but we might have been a week picking them up. We were slow getting on this."

Lafferty found himself saying coldly, "Why were you slow getting on it? Miss Wilson here told you about her brother two days ago."

Malloy looked at him. He said mildly, "That's when we got on it, but we didn't tell Miss Wilson that." His eyes met the girl's. "Women have a way of talking when they're worried. To the papers, say—or even work-boat skippers. And the Bureau isn't clairvoyant. We didn't tie in this other stuff with Wilson right away."

Lafferty thought about his dope theory. "What other stuff?"

"Money. A quarter of a million dollars' worth. U. S. currency. Twenties and fifties mostly. Phony, but plenty splendable. Somebody on the China coast with time on his hand and an artist's touch has been turning it out like it was newsprint. Except for the serial numbers, it's so good it takes a treasury man to spot it. We were tipped off it was on its way, but we didn't know how or when. We've been burning the air between here and Shanghai. All we can find out is that a ship's officer named Wilson was herding it in. That adds up to the *McComber*. And that's why I'm here. To find the counterfeit—and Wilson."

The girl said icily, "Mr. Malloy, if you think Les—"

Malloy stopped her.

"Lady, we don't think anything. All we believe is evidence. That's what I'm out to get."

"Then— then you haven't found—"

The federal man shook his head. "Not yet. Neither the money, or your brother." He smiled bleakly, looking at the two gunmen standing silently against the far bulkhead. "We've had a lot of interruptions, but it'll all come out. And now's as good a time as any. You want to tell us, Hymie?"

Hymie said, "Any yodeling I do, will be to a lawyer."

Malloy nodded. "Or to the boys in the back room of the Federal Building. They'll be younger men than me, Hymie. And stronger."

Hymie's eyes, bright, went blank. He tried his smile again. It came out a sneer. "Oke. It'll wait."

Lafferty, watching those eyes, wondered. Then he had it, and for the first time in hours he felt better. Les Wilson was alive. He was sure of it now. Alive, and a vital figure in this mess, even as Malloy had said. Just how deep he was in it, Lafferty didn't know, but that was what was behind Hymie's seeming willingness to let things ride. It made sense. Given a few days—or even less, if he was hurt—and the youngster wouldn't be alive to tell what he knew. And guilty or not, he deserved a chance to tell his side of it. Running queer money wasn't

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murder. A man shouldn't have to die to pay for a thing like that.

Lafferty took a deep breath. He said, "No, it won't wait, Hymie." He faced Malloy. "This is as good as the back room at the Federal Building. And I'm young enough and strong enough." He handed over Hymie's gun, motioning the others toward the alleyway. "Shut the door when you go out." He rolled up his sleeves. The others moved out into the passageway, leaving Hymie and himself alone.

Malloy said as he closed the door, "Skipper, this is irregular as all hell. I hope I'm not making a mistake."

Lafferty found a small grin. "You're not. You're not even witnessing this. And only one of us will come out of here walking. If it's Hymie, you can still sweat it out of him later." He shrugged. "If it's me—Well, we'll be a few hours, or days, ahead. I'll guarantee it."

The door latch clicked. Lafferty put his back against the panel. He said, "Round three— Slugger. I figure on doing better in this one. Where's Wilson?"

Hymie looked at his fingernails. "Dead, wise guy. He'll be bumping the pilings somewhere along the Embarcadero by this time."

Lafferty shook his head. "That wouldn't be hard to believe, knowing you. If you didn't need him, that is. But you do, so he's still alive. Where is he?"

Hymie breathed on his fingernails delicately. He said nothing. Lafferty stepped forward and hooked a left hand to the other's face. The sound rang through the small room like the flat of an oar striking water. The blow landed on the cheekbone and Hymie's head jerked and he sat down. His mouth was open a little now, and round. His head moved from side to side almost imperceptiblly. He said, "Joe, that was a mistake. I shot Henzel, so what can I lose? I'm going to kill you."

Lafferty watched him get to his feet, not knowing why, for he sensed suddenly that maybe the gunman was right. There was power in that muscled body, and a cold judgment behind the little eyes that Lafferty knew somehow would never panic. For the first time, too, he realized that the other's broken nose had the look of prolonged and practiced beatings about it. Hymie had never got that by misjudging a ping pong ball. Nor was the quick shuffle of his feet as he moved forward ever learned in a ballroom. It spoke of resin and sweat and blood spattered canvas.

Lafferty came to life and jabbed hurriedly with a left that missed, then crossed his other hand with all the weight of his stocky body behind it. The blow grazed the short hair above the gunman's ear, and Hymie laughed. Lafferty had heard pleasanter sounds in the sick bay of a dive-bombed Liberty.

And then Hymie was on him, throwing short sledging punches with both hands, none of them missing. Lafferty felt his mouth pulping over broken teeth and his head snapping backward as if his neck has broken. He tasted the salt blood gagging in his throat and then he was down, rolling and trying to cover up with knees and arms. It was as quick as that. Hymie stepped back, his small eyes gleaming, and aimed a kick at Lafferty's head. Lafferty rolled to one elbow, desperately, and got a knee under him and the kick drove into his side just below the ribs. He heard the breath go out of him in one great sobbing gasp and felt the stabbing agony above the point of his hip. He grabbed blindly, his fingers closed on cloth and he hung on, letting his weight drag the other downward. He kept his face buried in Hymie's stomach, waiting for the pain to pass.

Hymie hacked at him with both hands to the side of the head, but the punches, short, lacked the power of full range blows. Fighting to hold consciousness, Lafferty dragged his other knee under him, felt Hymie's breath, hot and moist, on his neck and then he brought his head upward sharply under the gunman's chin. Hymie groaned and staggered backward.

Lafferty clawed his way to his feet and followed, almost falling, but lashing out with wild, slugging blows that landed solidly. Hymie sagged, unable to raise his hands and Lafferty rocked him again, a solid smashing punch to the side of the jaw. It knocked the gunman backward and his head bounced off the edge of the washstand with a sound like hickory meeting horsehide. He lay where he fell, not moving.

Lafferty put both hands on the desk, his legs spread wide, swaying on his feet and

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drawing in deep aching breaths. Slowly his strength came back. He pulled Hymie to a sitting position, propping him against the bulkhead. Hymie's eyes opened, rolling wildly in his bloody face.

LAFFERTY said, "Where's Wilson?" The gunman's eyes steadied, looking up at him, then he gestured upward with an extended finger of his clenched hand. Lafferty sighed and made himself think of Henzel and Tiny Kimbrough and a girl's gray eyes near to tears. He threw a short slashing blow flush to the already flattened nose. He felt cartilage break under his knuckles and saw blood welling downward from the wide nostrils.

"Wilson, Hymie," he said, "or this is only the beginning. I promise you." He drew back his fist again.

Hymie wiped the back of his hand across his lip and looked at the blood that came away. His eyes raised slowly to Lafferty's and he started to speak. Then his head began shaking uncontrollably. He swallowed and said, almost whispering, "The *Moorland*. She's the third ship over. In the armed guard's quarters."

Lafferty wiped his face with the tail of his shirt and went out into the alleyway. He was glad it was dark. He must have been a sight.

The girl spoke first and she said a funny thing. "Are you all right?" Lafferty didn't get it. Not right then. It didn't come to him till later. Now he said, "Yes, your brother's okay, but he may not be pretty to look at. You'd better stay here." He took Al's gun out of his pocket and gave it to her. He turned to Malloy. "Put Al in with Hymie and lock the door. There'll be a key on the rack in the Old Man's room. Let Donna stay here in case they try to crash the door. We'll look in on Wilson."

They crossed to the *Moorland*, climbing over the low bulwarks of the two intervening ships. The gunner's fo'c's'le was locked, but there were sound from inside. Like a hurt animal. Malloy put the muzzle of his revolver against the lock and pulled the trigger.

They found Wilson lying face down on the bare springs of one of the bunks. He hadn't even raised his head at the rocking reverberation of the shot. He seemed to be past caring. In the cone of the flashlight, Lafferty saw that his back was a mass of festering welts. A length of three-inch manila rope lay on the deck beside him. The fibers were dry with clotted blood. Lafferty said, "Les," gently.

When he saw it wasn't Hymie, the youngster sat up. His face wasn't much better than his back. It was just a swollen, bloody mask, but his eyes were alive. They were gray like his sister's Lafferty saw, and bright now with the relief and the gladness of seeing them here.

Malloy showed his badge and set his flashlight base down on the table. He said shortly, "Tell us about it."

LAFFERTY looked around the room. It was bare. He said to Malloy, "It doesn't look like he's had anything to eat or drink for a long time. Let's get him out of here."

Wilson said wearily, "That'll wait. I don't feel like eating. Where's the guy with the nose?"

Lafferty said, "He don't feel like eating either. How long've you been here?"

"Since the lay-up gang left yesterday. Before that they had me in the paint locker on the *McComber*—after the Customs had gone through it, that is. I was gagged and tied up." He shuddered. "It wasn't nice. Broken-nose and another guy boarded with the shore gang. They came right to my room and got me."

Malloy said sharply, "Then what was the idea of all this? A highjack, or were you rigging a double-cross on your friends on the China coast? Why didn't you show Hymie where the queer was stached?"

Wilson ran his tongue along his caked lips. He shook his head slowly. "Mister, am I going to have trouble with you too? I don't know anything about the money, except what I learned from the hoods who tried to beat it out of me. They thought I was lying or holding out. I wasn't, so help me, but they wouldn't believe the truth."

"I will," Malloy said, "if it is the truth. "Keep talking."

Wilson looked up at him. "All I know is what I can piece together. I relieved the *McComber's* regular third in Shanghai—in a hurry. He had fallen from a 'tween-decks ladder into the lower hold. It broke his

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neck. He was dead before they got to him. Evidently he was the in-between man in this money running business. The *McComber* was singled up and ready to go when I went aboard and the way it looks, the big shot in Shanghai never even knew the other mate didn't sail. I suppose that's why the jokers on this end of the line didn't know of the last minute change. A lot of people die in China every day and the press coverage on obituaries isn't as complete as it is here."

He paused, smiling faintly. "The man whose place I took was named Wilton. Close enough, I guess, for broken-nose and his pals—and you—to think I was him, and that I was holding out."

Malloy was silent. After a moment he said thoughtfully, "It sounds logical enough, but——"

Lafferty said, "There aren't any buts. Get the forked lightning boys to burning some more air between here and Shanghai. They can check on that Wilton lad easily enough."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Malloy said slowly. "That'll come all right. I'm way ahead of you. What I had in mind was the money. Without it we haven't got a case. On Hymie and Al, yes. Murder is something that even a jury can understand, but this thing goes farther than that. It's big. There's an organization behind it. With proper evidence we'd see that they got the book."

Something rang a bell in Lafferty's head. He stared at Malloy.

"Where have you searched for this stuff?"

The federal man looked at him disgustedly. "Where haven't we looked! Between me and Hymie and Henzel and the Customs we've torn that hooker apart. There's not a phony bulkhead or false compartment in the ship. She's as sound as the day she left the yard."

Lafferty started for the door. "I've gone to see for quite a while. I could be wrong, but I've got a hunch. I'll meet you on the *McComber*."

He went out on deck and retraced his steps back to the freighter, then made his way down the alleyway to the crew's fo'cs'le. The flashlight showed him that it was an unholy mess like everything else, but nothing much had been torn apart. There really wasn't much to tear apart. Maybe that was why it had been all but overlooked. It was just a steel-sided room, fairly big, with double-decked pipe berths and a half dozen metal lockers against the wall. The lockers had been torn open all right, revealing a lot of bent and broken clothes hangers, but the mess itself was of the crew's own doing.

The deck was littered with trash, like a dozen other ships that Lafferty had seen after the crew was paid off. There were torn magazines, cigarette butts, clothing dirty and beyond repair, and an occasional discarded shoe or washdown boot. A sour smell of sweat, old socks and spilled beer hung over everything.

And in one corner, wedged under a bunk and festooned with a pair of paint-stained dungarees, was the wooden box that Lafferty was looking for. It was identical with those in the dozen other fo'c's'les that he remembered. It was scarred, unpainted, inconspicuous, and from the looks of the rusty ten-cent lock that held it closed, never opened. Lafferty grinned, recognizing the traditional book box put aboard merchant ships by the Seaman's Institute.

The custom, as Lafferty remembered, went back to sometime around the turn of the century. So did the books. It contained, he knew, the customary library contributed by well-meaning but naive elderly ladies the country over. There would be Black Beauty, The Little Shepherd Of Kingdom Come, and Rev. Adams' Book Of Selected Psalms.

He kicked the wedging away, bent down and pulled the box to him. He noticed with interest that the lock wasn't as rusted as it deserved to be. He picked up one of the broken toed shoes lying on the deck and hit the lock sharply with the heel. The hasp fell away. He lifted the lid. The titles, he saw, ran true to tradition, names that would properly discourage the idly curious from further interest.

He reached for a mildewed, cockroach-eaten copy of Peggy and Her Pals. His hand was trembling a little and the cover all but crumbled in his grasp. It did, a second later, as he saw what lay beneath it. The money was there, packed solidly. There was nothing old or musty about it. It was crisp, new and very sinful with nothing of the past century about it. The elderly ladies would have been shocked.

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Lafferty had never seen that much money in his life, even phony money. He picked up one of the bundles. That's when he heard the racket on deck. There was the clatter of ladder rungs against the hull, a shouted order and the launch's engine coughing reluctantly, followed by the muffled explosion of two shots fired in rapid succession. Lafferty made for the door in great leaping strides.

He found Malloy leaning over the rail, peering into the darkness. The girl and young Wilson stood behind him. Nobody was saying much, except Malloy who was cursing softly and bitterly to himself. His face held a look of pained disgust and his gun was leveled uncertainly, searching for a target. There wasn't any. Lafferty didn't have to be told that the two gunmen were on their way.

To the east the night was lessening, bringing with it the unreal light of false dawn, but there was still the blank backdrop of fog sealing off visibility at not more than a hundred yards away. The only sound was the unsure rhythm of the engine in the near distance, laboring unnaturally. It stopped then, suddenly and decisively, and then there was silence. Lafferty smiled.

Malloy didn't. He said, "What a couple of chumps! Who'd have thought they could squeeze through a porthole?"

"I should have thought of it," Lafferty admitted. "They've been made big enough on these Liberties to let a man escape in case of trouble at sea. But I did remember something else." He told Malloy about the money.

Malloy said, "That's good." He added quickly, "But losing those hooligans isn't. They'll be long gone—and with a fine start. They'll be tough to pick up by the time we get the word out."

"No," Lafferty said, "you're wrong. They're high and dry by this time, on the mud flats up the bay. They've got no engine now. I left a line hanging over the side, where it couldn't fail to foul the screw. By this time it'll be wrapped around the wheel tighter'n a—" He smiled. "Well, plenty tight. It'd take a drydocking job to clear it."

Malloy didn't look convinced. "I hope you're right, Skipper, but I've seen this bay on clear days. You can see the shore birds swimming for miles in any direction."

LAFFERTY'S grin broadened. With his pulped mouth it hurt, but it was worth it. He said, "They weren't swimming. They were walking. The water's that thin. And the tide'll be ebbing any time now. That will keep Hymie and Al up there for another twelve hours anyway. Long enough for the Coast Guard to pick them up. They patrol this area twice a day." He looked up at the sky. There were patches of pale gray showing against the darkness. "This will break in an hour or two. It'll be a cinch for the boys in blue. Like picking off sitting ducks in a tar barrel."

Malloy said again, "I hope you're right, but——"

His answer came from far down the bay where a patrol boat's siren was sending a probing finger of sound through the thinning fog. It grew steadily louder. The sound was very welcome to John Lafferty. It had been a night. But it was nearly over now and it had helped to change his mind about a couple of things.

Thinking about it, he turned to the girl, standing in the shelter of the deckhouse, talking in a low voice to her brother. "I've been wrong about a thng or two," he told her.

She looked at him, then at Malloy. "About the government men, you mean?"

He nodded. "That, and about a trip I was going to take. Life ashore has its good points. I was thinking of making it a permanent way of life. Maybe we could get together some time and talk it over. Not too soon, of course. Tonight, say, over drinks and dinner."

This time she smiled without having to work on it at all. Lafferty had known all along that he was going to like it that way. He did. Then she looked at his broken mouth and said doubtfully, "Well, I don't know about—"

Lafferty grinned. He said, "Well, anyway I'll enjoy the drinks." He almost added, "—and the company," but he didn't. That could wait till later.

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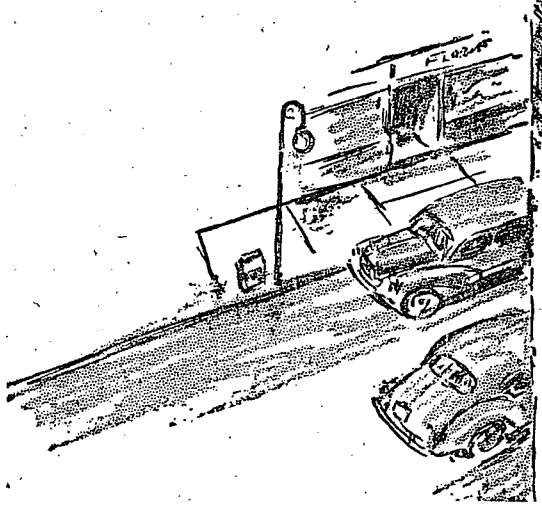
High Windows

By HENRY H. CURRAN

CHARLIE THE POLACK, who was born in New York and had been to high school, came out of the old tenement near Tompkins Square, slung his tackle and pail over his shoulder, and set off for the cleaning of many windows. They would be high windows, ten, twenty stories up, which take nerve. "You got to have nerve, or you go to the ground," was the saying in the trade. Charlie figured he had the nerve, but he liked the high places less each time, and he was not sure. He never looked down.

As he turned west, he cocked his eye at the weather. The northeaster was coming cold and fast, driving the black rain clouds over the roof tops, turning up the coat collars of the men, tearing at the hair and hats of the women, raising all hell of a Monday morning. It would be windy today, up there on the ledges. Charlie put his head down, swung along toward the big red apartment house near Washington Square, then forgot about the window sills, for he was thinking wholly of yesterday, when the sun had shone.



Funny How Some People Are Always Suspicious of the Man Who Cleans the Windows!

And that was some Sunday! All with Rose, church in the morning, walk in Central Park in the afternoon, then even the movies, all with Rose who had unexpectedly said "Yes" to each invitation. In the park, with his arm around her shoulder and hers around his waist, they had not bothered about the crowds of strollers who elbowed them off the paths—another world. Charlie was building their own world, taking his nerve with him on that last day of Indian summer, asking the highest question of all.

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Now, in the northeaster, he saw only the laughing brown eyes, the round happy face of Rose when she said "Yes," so low that he could hardly hear it, while her arm went tighter around his waist. He looked up again, laughing. A spatter of raindrops smote him in the face, spitefully and fast. They seemed personal, a shower of bullets into his happiness, a warning from the northeaster. He put his head down. The drops stopped.

When he reached the door of the big red apartment house, he was smiling again.

"Hey, Polack, what's the joke?" The doorman put his head all the way out.

"Tell you next week—when I'm married!" The window cleaner was laughing now.

"What!"

"And look here, big shot, don't call me Polack. I'm American."

"Once a Polack, always a Polack," pronounced the doorman. They both grinned. "All right, Charlie, look out for yourself—bad today, up in those windows. I mean it—look out." The doorman withdrew his head.

"Okay," said the window cleaner, quickly.

DOWN in the basement there was silence. Bill the back elevator man was usually there, shuttling his full car noisily up and down, sweaty and important. Now there was nobody about, no sound.

"Hey, Bill!" Charlie's tentative call sounded through the cellar purlieus, from one pipe to another, waking only its own echo.

"Bill!" He shouted more loudly.

"Ah, wot the hell—where you goin'?" The answer was indistinct, from far off, with an air of finality.

"Ten B— Miss Perkins— I'm late."

"G'wan, walk up— Polack— huh— wot a face."

"Okay."

Charlie was used to those cracks about his face. Even Rose sometimes laughed at his dusty red hair, the blue eyes peeking out under it, the chin that seemed to stop before it began. Never mind, he had the nerve, he guessed, even if he didn't have the chin. Nor did he mind walking up the stairs, not very much, but he minded Bill's Monday morning hangover, with nobody in his place. Only once had a thief got by the basement guard and up into the big house. That was ten years ago. Now there were more thieves about, more guns, and the way was open. Charlie shook his head as he trudged up the steep stairs. It was a queer Monday morning.

"Who is it?" The woman's voice that answered his push of the button at the kitchen door had no welcome in it.

"Window cleaner, ma'am."

"Oh." The door opened a crack, with a pair of bespectacled sharp eyes looking through. "Come in." The door opened wider.

"Sorry to be late," said the window cleaner.

"Why did you come at all?" asked Miss Susan Perkins acidly. "You always come just before it rains. It's a sure sign."

Charlie looked at the little old lady standing up so straight, her white hair and gold specs, the same black dress. She was always like this. "Shall I go ahead, ma'm?" he asked.

"You might as well. Nobody knows when under the canopy you'll be here again. Begin here. Maid's gone. Left yesterday. No good anyhow. Do the dining room next and so on around. Oh—and tell me when you get to my bedroom—don't forget now."

"Okay," said Charlie, unslinging his tackle and pail, brush, squeegee and chamois. Once again that crack about her bedroom. Always worrying about her jewelry, as though he might steal it. When he got to the bedroom, she would come in and stand guard in front of her bureau, until he was through and got out. Always did it, made him mad.

He filled the pail with water, put on the belt, hitched one strap to the hook on the wall outside, climbed out on the window sill, then hitched the other strap and went to work, as she watched him begin. He was standing on the window sill now, facing her, his body swinging out over space to the full length of the tight straps. He dipped the brush in the pail, reached up and began on the upper sash. Rub, rub, rub. The dirty water trickled down the small, right-angled window panes. Then the squeegee would come, then the chamois, which left no lint. Rub, rub, rub, never looking down.

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"Now be careful," commanded Miss Susan Perkins suddenly, looking as though she might stamp her foot. "You might fall, and then—well." She finished rather lamely, seeming to shiver a little.

"Okay, ma'am okay," said Charlie hurriedly, through the window. She watched her as she walked out, very straight, with short quick steps. "Not such a bad guy"; he said to himself, "wish she'd lay off that stuff about how I might go to the ground." He started to look down, then snapped his head up.

Window cleaning was cold that day, he discovered, icy, for the first time since last winter. The northeaster tore at him in a savage, persistent way, as though bent on blowing him down to death in the cement yard below. The water was cold. In and out of the pail, changing dirty water for clean, his hands, already numb, would be chapped tonight.

In the dining room he paused to count all the little window panes again. Let's see, 5 windows with 8 panes apiece, that's 40. Then 8 windows with 12 panes apiece, that's 96. And 3 with 16 panes apiece, that's 48. Total for the flat, 184 panes, all small and rectangular, all hard to clean at the corners. Too small and too many.

He began rubbing again. He had stopped for only a few seconds. Miss Perkins appeared.

"Thought maybe you'd fallen out," she said. "You weren't working."

"No, I didn't fall out," said Charlie nervously. She seemed determined to have him do so. "Just counting the window panes," he explained. "184 of 'em, and hard cleaning, every one of 'em."

"How do you know there are that many? You haven't been around counting them."

"Mathematics," said Charlie profoundly. "Multiply, add, and you've got it."

Miss Perkins stared. "You must be good at figures," she said. "Better than you are at window cleaning. You ought to be in a better job."

Charlie looked at her searchingly. He could not decide whether she was making fun of him or not. He had been thinking about a better job, something that paid better, and was nearer the ground.

"That's what I want," he said suddenly. "Then I could—"

"Could what?"

"Look out for Rose." The words came out as though his thoughts were just behind his lips and could not stay in. Charlie grinned. Then he blushed—what would the old lady care?".

"I didn't mean—" he stammered.

"You did mean it, or you wouldn't have said it." The sharp eyes were gleaming through the specs. "Now you go on with your work, young man, and keep your mind on it."

Miss Perkins turned and walked stiffly away. Her steps were shorter than usual, which betokened agitation, or anger, you never could tell which. Charile put it down to anger.

IN THE spare room he rubbed faster, for a gust of raindrops was pelting him from behind. They stopped in a moment, another warning that the northeaster was about to let loose. He'd like to finish the job, before the deluge came. Only one more room, and that was the bedroom. He would tell her, then she would stand guard over the jewelry again. What a mean guy she was, after all! And he had let go that silly blurting out about Rose. His face went hot again when he thought of it. Ah, to hell with her!

As he dried the last pane in the spare room—number 144, he reflected—he climbed part way in, and on the wet window sill slipped, as he absent mindedly unhooked the last strap. He was off balance, with no leg hold and going down. For a second it was either way, grab quick or go to the ground. Instantly and desperately, he got one hand on the inside of the window sill, stopped the downward momentum with a jerk, somehow got the other hand up with the first, then slowly hauled himself up and over. He stood shaking, noticing casually his trousers torn open at one knee, bleeding where it had scraped on the window sill. He had never slipped before.

Slowly he turned and closed the window, slowly emptied the pail and filled it again, hesitated, started to move, uncertainly, then stood still again. He had heard the bell in the kitchen ring, heard the door open, and the words, "Gas company—meter reading."

He heard the door close, then suddenly, in a snarling low voice, "Stick 'em up."

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A gasp from Miss Perkins.

"Shut up, you old fool—shut up or I'll put a bullet in your head." The voice was louder. "Anybody else here?"

A pause, then, "Hurry up."

Miss Perkins said, "No."

"Sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." She had raised her voice.

"Quiet, damn you. If there is, he'll be dead in a minute. Now take me to that jewelry of yours—quick—I know where it is—and quiet."

The steps came along the inside hall, past the spare room door, with a pause as though someone were looking in, then went around the corner to the bedroom.

Charlie had crouched quickly and silently into the bathroom. And now what? He was still trembling from his slip at the window. He knew the sure suicide of tackling a gunman barehanded. He had often wondered what he'd do, if a thing like this came—fight and be killed, or surrender and live? Sense said surrender. And the jewelry—let the old lady lose it—what the hell use is all that shiny stuff anyhow? He was thinking fast. And yet she had said there was nobody else around, lied, saved his life perhaps. That was pretty good. But— Rose? And it was only yesterday that she—. No—sit tight, you fool—a lot of jewelry against—life. Cut it. Or was it just that he hadn't the nerve? The thoughts ran up and down, jagged, like lightning. "But I can't just hide," he finished, "can't tell Rose that, can't tell Rose."

He slipped off his belt and tackle, one shoe, then the other. He made no sound that he could even hear himself. Then he peered out of the bathroom. He knew it before he looked, for he knew the room by heart. The only thing that might help was the door stop, a single heavy flatiron that he had always smiled to see again. Queer old lady, she was. It was a good door stop, though, heavy at the bottom, with a good handle, better than the light little brass things they had in the stores. Good for a door, no so good for a gunman. There was nothing else.

The window cleaner waited, thinking. It was two seconds perhaps, but it felt like two hours. He came out of the bathroom, went swiftly and noiselessly to where the flatiron was, picked it up and kept on going, slowly and surely now, toward the bedroom, from which he could hear the rustling of tissue paper. He crossed the hall to the bedroom door. He made no noise. He stopped, tense and holding his breath.

"Hurry up—I haven't got all day." There was the voice again, with anger in the snarl.

At the door, as he stopped, a vision of Rose as he saw her yesterday, came and went, in a flash. He gulped, but checked it in time. Peeking around the door, slowly, just an eye, he saw the thief with back turned to him, gun in hand, watching Miss Perkins taking the little boxes and tissue paper wrappings out of the bureau.

He waited again. Then he leaped in with a spring, hand up with the flatiron. The gunman turned, and the room was nothing but noise, a sharp, rending roar, savage and terrible. Charlie's hand was coming down, instinctively toward the hand with the gun. The flatiron crashed down on the wrist, straight and hard. Again, that barking, shattering noise. He raised his arm, reached and brought the homely weapon down on the gunman's forehead. As the figure lunged toward him, he landed another blow. The thief seemed to wobble in the knees, his body swayed, then slumped down to the floor, where it lay on its side, without motion, as though in sleep. The gun clattered off to one side. Charlie reached quickly, picked it up and stood panting, shaking, pointing the gun down at the quiet figure.

"Well, what do we do now?" said Miss Susan Perkins.

"For God's—sake—" Charlie was breathing hard— "get the men up, house telephone — then — police — quick — I can't—" He was swaying.

Receivers, a dial, clicking, clicking, a body lying asleep on the floor with blood flowing about the head—all in this bedroom where he cleaned windows—all in this—and the noise—his ears—would they never—come? As he waited, the body moved a little, the eyes opened and stared dully.

"Lie still, or I'll put a bullet in your head," said the window cleaner huskily. The body was still again.

The handyman came first, then the doorman, then Miss Perkins, close after them.

"Something to tie him up with—hurry up," said the handyman.

Miss Perkins opened a bureau drawer and

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whisked out a pair of long nylon stockings. The handyman made short work of it. Handymen fix anything.

"There, you bum," he remarked, surveying the job.

The doorman had his hand on the window cleaner's shoulder. "You got the guy!" he said with a queer loudness, then "No more windows today mind now."

THE police came running, two from the radio car with guns drawn. One of them bent down and frisked the thief. The other turned to Charlie, looking hard at him.

"Better give me the gun, son," he said.

Charlie handed it over.

"Hum—45." The cop took out the clip. He looked at the window cleaner again, then suddenly laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded Charlie.

"Face—your face." The cop paused. "Did you do all this?" He was not laughing now.

"Yeah, I guess so," said Charlie.

"What did you hit him with?"

"Flatiron. On the floor there."

The cop picked it up, where Charlie had dropped it when he picked up the gun. He looked at it, felt of it, held it hanging, to see how heavy it was.

"Say, what are we coming to? Yesterday a woman conks a guy with her handbag—see it, in the paper? Stopped a stick-up. Now it's a flatiron."

The other cop had found the bullet holes, one in the wall, the other in the floor. He was measuring the angles. "Nearly got you," he said, soberly.

"Good job, son," said the first cop, not laughing.

Then there were more cops, and the white-jacketed young doctor from the ambulance. The wail of the sirens had been coming through the windows. The doctor, on his knees by the thug, feeling, listening, then whipping out bandages, took some time. At last, getting up, he looked suddenly bored. "He'll live easy enough, young, way they all are," he said. "Slight concussion, though. Scalp wounds, nothing. Wrist broken. Hospital."

They lifted up the limp body and carried it out. The window cleaner got his brush and pail and mopped up the floor, then stood dumbly while the doctor cleaned up his knee. He had said nothing about the slip on the window sill.

"You'll get word where to go to court," said the last cop as he departed.

When they had gone, Miss Perkins took charge. "Now we'll clean the rest of the windows," she said.

The window cleaner walked slowly to the nearest window. He hitched one strap, stood on the window sill and looked down. Trembling, in a sudden spasm, he looked quickly up again, slowly hitched the other strap and went to work. Rub, rub, rub, don't look down, don't. It was the hardest job of all.

Miss Perkins glanced sharply at him, then left the room, left him alone in it, for the first time. She had not put her jewelry away.

"I have some telephoning to do," she said. Her short steps went pattering down the hall.

As the window cleaner got near to the end of his work, sticking to it, the northeaster came on in earnest, blowing the living lights out of everything detachable in New York, drenching the city with a horizontal rain that found every open thing and soaked it. He finished the job in the storm, climbed in his wet clothes clinging coldly to his skin, and stood at the front door as Miss Perkins signed the slip.

"I can't do much for you, young man," she said, as she returned the slip to him, standing straight, with a slight quaver in her voice. "My brother runs a bank, though. If you give him this note tomorrow—after luncheon when he always feels better—I think he may give you a job—figures—on trial—he may. I've been telephoning him."

She handed him a small white envelope.

"Thanks," said Charlie, blankly. He stood, hesitating.

"Now get along," said Miss Perkins. "Oh—and tell me—what's her name?"

"Rose," said the window cleaner vaguely—was there somebody named Rose?

He put the envelope in his pocket, then turned as he went out. "Thanks," he said again, coming back part way into the world.

Miss Perkins closed the door.

Charlie the Polack walked quickly home, not regarding the rain. "Now I can tell Rose," was all he was thinking, "I can tell Rose."

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MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell

Life Span

A PARTY of alkali-powdered prospectors pitched camp three days from Bent's Fort in Apache country one afternoon in January, 1847, and William Stephen, the leader, immediately directed construction of a stockade. The other four demurred, claiming it was too hot and that panning streams did not include hewing logs. They chided Stephen, a Bible-reader, about seeking protection beyond that given by his faith. Stephen went to the two New Mexicans in the party and asked them to help, and the three started work. The New Mexicans were aware of the Pueblo Indian temper at the time, when Norte-Americanos were trying to control the country. The other four finally pitched in, and a rude, low-walled blockhouse was completed a week later. Two nights after that it was attacked by Pueblos and Taos tribesmen who killed the New Mexicans and one American, acting as herd guard; they surrounded the tiny fort and, during the first day, killed another American and wounded Stephen. The wounded Bible-reader, with his two remaining men, held through the day; but that night, Stephen took another wound.

The second day brought sudden death to the two men with Stephen when they tried to run for water, one covering the other, so Stephen held alone, watching the buzzards chew at the bodies, feeling searing thirst and throbs of pain. Twice, the tribesmen tried to rush; each time, Stephen picked off the leaders. The third night, they set fire to one wall, and the defender beat it out. At dawn of the third day, they rushed again and shot Stephen through the throat. But he held, praying, he said, to his faith. His prayers couldn't have been very loud, but they must have been heard because a supply train from Bent's arrived, and the besiegers melted into the desert. Stephen saw nothing odd or heroic in having held out. "The Bible says seventy years per man, don't it? Well, I'm only sixty-six."

There was no answer to that, except that he was still alive and was reported so for years afterward.

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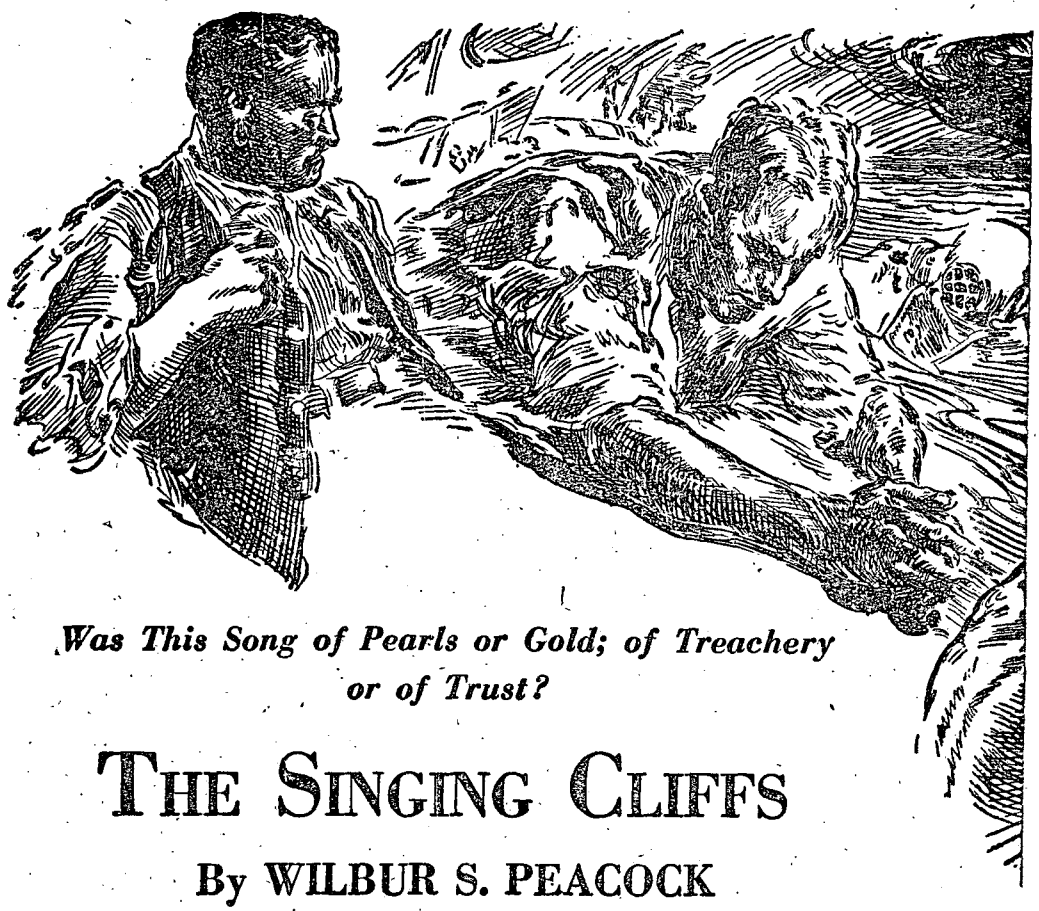

Was This Song of Pearls or Gold; of Treachery or of Trust?

THE SINGING CLIFFS

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

I

THERE was the smell of copra, rotten-sweet and cloying, over everything. Near the reef, two natives fished from the side of an outrigger, watching indifferently as the *Seagull* swung into anchorage. The single spire of Kakuana Mountain lifted back of the town, and the coconut terraces made a series of arcs along its sides.

Vince Carteret leaned against the forerail and watched the shore slip silently toward the schooner. It was as though the land moved and the *Seagull* stood still. The sensation always amused him, as though it were new and hadn't been a regular occurrence in the three years he had run his schooner from island to island on his trading route.

His flipped cigarette dropped in a soaring arc, and a white-headed fish broke water, taking it and whirling back into the blue depths. Vince grinned and straightened, hearing the rumbling of the auxiliary Diesel die away amid the first rattling of the anchor chain dropping its weight to the bottom. The *Seagull* heeled around, tugging gently at the anchor in the rising tide.

"Shipshape, sar!" Wimpy said from Carteret's side. "Orders, sar?"

Vince Carteret scowled judiciously, liking the byplay. Wimpy, clad only in a crotch-clout, brown skin shining as though oiled, watched eagerly. Three years they had been together, and Wimpy's throttling ambition was to be what he conceived a perfect First Mate to be.

"Run the goods to the dock, batten everything down, and then give everybody a night off, except a single watch, Mister," Vince Carteret said.

"Aye, aye, sar! Wimpy turned away, hesitated and swung back. "Begging Captain's pardon, sar," he finished. "It is of my mind that this heat will spoil the—"

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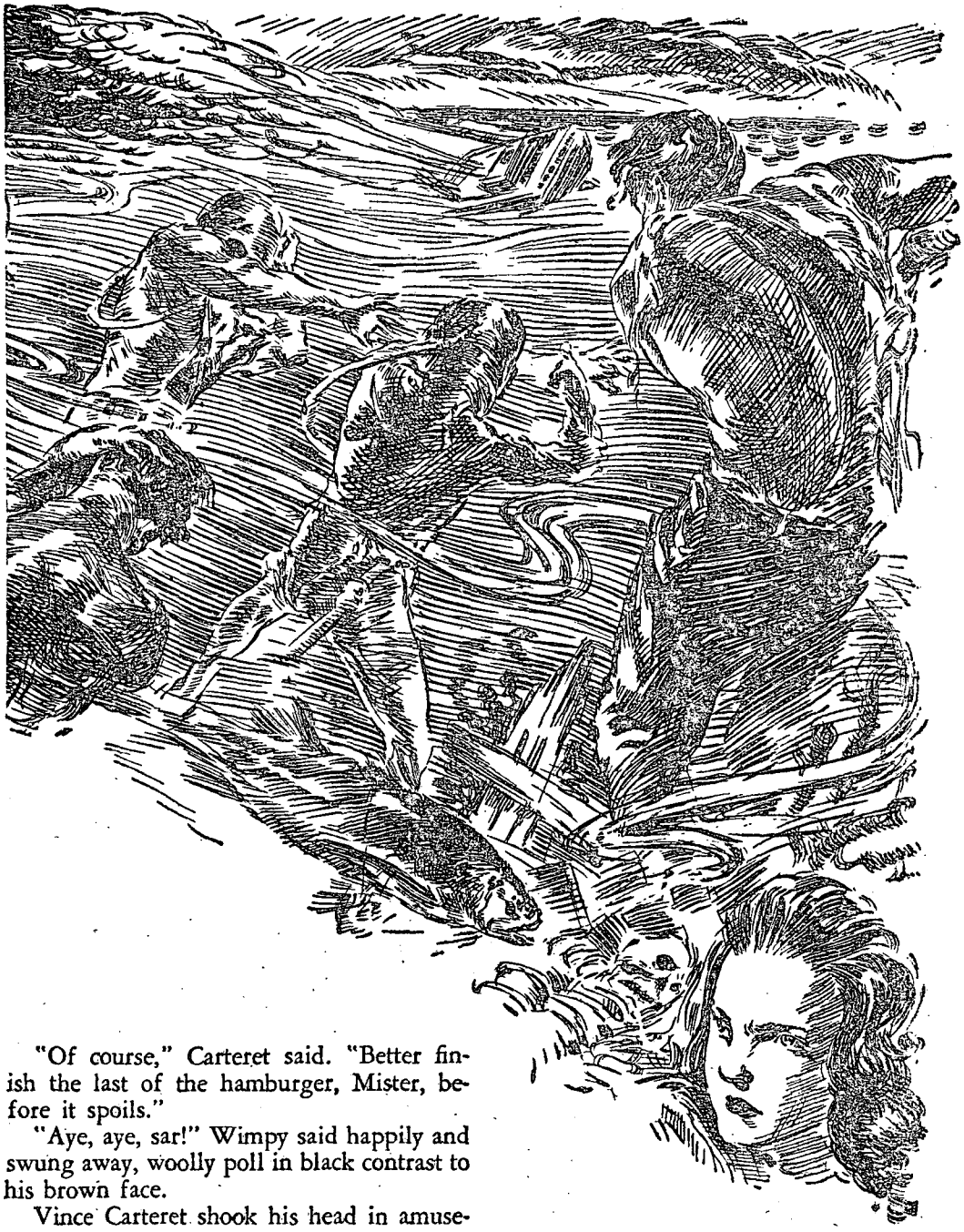

"Of course," Carteret said. "Better finish the last of the hamburger, Mister, before it spoils."

"Aye, aye, sar!" Wimpy said happily and swung away, woolly poll in black contrast to his brown face.

Vince Carteret shook his head in amusement. Since the day Wimpy had been introduced to the glory of fried hamburgers, all other food had paled by comparison. By sly innuendo and stronger suggestions, he managed to clean the kerosene refrigerator of frozen ground meat long before the *Seagull* made its regular contacts at the few places it could be bought.

The Kanakas were opening a hatch now, two dropping inside to muscle up the crates and boxes; and satisfied that there was no longer any need of his services aboard ship, Vince Carteret hailed an approaching outrigger and went nimbly down a hanging ladder to the bobbing craft. The boatman grinned with white teeth, bit experimentally at the coin offered him and then swung the canoe toward the dock with sweeping slashes of his paddle.

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THE singing came then, multi-noted and harmonious, as though some Aeolian harp was being fingered in the far distance. It rose, without meter or paced melody, but there was a wild beauty in it, pagan and primeval. Vince thrilled to it as he always did, and swung to face the reaching, overhanging cliff which was its source.

These were the Singing Cliffs, a towering buttress of white chalky stone, honeycombed with interstices and "breathing holes." When the tide came in or surged outward, air was forced through the holes, lifting a keening into being, strange and lonely and hauntingly beautiful.

He had heard this sound before, many times. When first out of the Navy, wanderlust eating at his heart, he had heard it early one June morning, the sky dappled with early sunshine, the trading schooner rocking gently in the swell.

That singing had bound him to this part of the world, bound him tightly, and it was then he had made his choice. With his savings, he had bought the *Seagull* and signed a crew, all Kanakas far from home, whose ship had floundered on the reef in a twisting blow. He had stocked the ship and plied the islands, buying copra and shells and an occasional pearl. There was little profit, but he did not measure success by the weight of his purse, and so he was content.

And now, hearing the cries of the Singing Cliffs again, he was glad to be back. He grinned amiably at the boatman, breathing deep of the warm air, broad shoulders completely relaxed.

The canoe swung into the dock, and he went upward, conscious of the firmness, rocking a bit with sea legs. He could see the activity aboard the *Seagull* as Wimpy drove the crew to unload. Satisfied, he swung away and paced with slow deliberation toward the town.

It was set close to the water, the jungle crowding in. Some buildings were frame, whitewashed and sturdy, others were native, constructed of limber bamboo trunks, thatched with thick mattings of pandanus leaves.

Children, brown skinned and naked, played in the street. Natives moved indolently in the sunlight, the men wide shouldered and slim-legged, the women wearing bright turns of cloth about their waists, their breasts bare and full-rounded.

Some waved and smiled, for Vince Carteret was well-known on the island, and he stopped now and again for a few words, the native tongue coming naturally and free from his lips. Laughter came easily, and he found lemon drops for the children. He was home again, and sometimes, he had trouble in remembering that this was not his land.

HE WENT ahead, at last, turning up the short, crushed-shell path to Hull Gregson's post. He didn't like the man, never had, but Gregson was the biggest trader in the islands and the business he gave Vince Carteret was so great it could not be dropped.

There were those who said the man's name was not Gregson, and there were those who said he was wanted by the Sureté of Paris for a knifing. And yet others said he was a 'breed, his father a white renegade, his mother a slim-flanked beauty from the north of the Solomons. Be that as it may, he was shrewd and sly, with the great body of a fighting man, yet affecting earrings in his ear lobes, his black hair pomaded and perfumed like that of a Brisbane dandy.

He stood now behind the counter of his post and white teeth flashed in a smile. If there was no warmth in the smile, well, that was his nature.

"Carteret!" he said. "I thought that schooner looked like yours. How was trading?"

"So so!" Vince Carteret fished his wallet from a hip pocket. "I've got your order coming up," he said. "And I've signed for all the copra at Molukski and Peuter."

"Good!" Gregson rubbed heavy hands together. "I'll buy a drink."

"Thanks!" Carteret sat on the edge of the counter.

He saw the girl then. His eyes had been dazed by sunlight and so he hadn't seen her at the side of the post. He had gone straight to Hull Gregson; and since she had made no sound or movement, she had escaped his gaze.

But now she moved, and his breath caught in his throat at sight of her slim loveliness. She might have been native so blue-black was her hair. But her skin was

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white, her lips bright and exciting. She wore blue, the softest of shades, and she smiled a bit, flattered and amused by his stare. He could feel the flush tiding upward from the neck of his crew shirt.

"I'll come back later, Mr. Gregson," she said, "when you aren't busy."

"No, no," the trader said. "The business is over. Incidentally, you've never met Vince Carteret."

Carteret came awkwardly to his feet, towering over the girl, his blond hair a bright contrast to hers.

"I'm Mona Stevens, Mr. Carteret," the girl said. "I've heard quite a bit about you. It seems that you've become quite a legendary figure in the islands."

"The natives like blondes," Vince said deprecatingly.

"Miss Stevens arrived a few weeks ago from Melbourne," Gregson said. "She's taken over the coconut lands left by her father." He grinned without amusement. "Doing pretty well, too."

"Thank you," the girl said, smiling at Carteret. "Will you be here long?" she finished.

Vince Carteret shook his head. "About three days," he said. "Then I'll head back for Kikori and catch a tramp steamer to Melbourne for a vacation of some sort."

"Oh! Well, have dinner tomorrow night with me at my house; I'd love to hear about the islands."

"Well—" Carteret flushed. "Thank you; I'd be delighted."

"Good!" Mona Stevens turned to Gregson. "I'll make out the order tomorrow, Mr. Gregson," she finished. "Good afternoon."

She was gone then, the tap tap of her heels on the flooring a bright challenge. She turned at the door and smiled, and then the door was closed and the men were alone.

Carteret smiled sheepishly. "I must have looked like a fool," he said ruefully. "Lord! I'd forgotten what a white woman was like."

Gregson licked his lips. "First I've seen here in ten years, since long before the war. Plenty neat, huh?"

"Plenty," Carteret agreed. "Then she's the daughter of Chaim Stevens?"

Gregson nodded. "That's her. Says she couldn't get here before this, what with the war and her job and everything. But now she pops up and takes over her old man's plantation. Don't know why she didn't keep on nursing; she's good enough to be a doc, the way she set a native's arm."

HE FOUND a bottle and poured drinks. Vince Carteret nursed his, a vague thought crystallizing in his memory.

"Seems to me you've been working that land," he said. "This sort of leaves you out in the cold, doesn't it?"

The trader poured a second drink for himself, his earrings glittering as he tossed it off. He licked his lips, smiling again, and shook his head.

"Ill make out all right," he said softly. "But that's not important right now. What is, is that I've got a little job I'd like for you to do for me."

"Such as?" Carteret said indifferently, still held enthralled by his memory of Mona Stevens.

"Such as suit-diving and salvaging the yacht *Maukeena* beneath the Singing Cliffs."

"Are you crazy!" Vince Carteret stared in amazement. "Those currents would tie a man in knots. I've seen skin divers try to go down there, and they didn't have a chance."

"Yes, but they were skin divers. A man in a suit, well-weighted, wouldn't have much trouble."

Carteret shook his head. "It could be done, but not by me," he agreed finally. "I got my belly full of diving in the Navy; from now on the only time I get in water is when I take a bath."

Hull Gregson replaced the bottle on the back shelf. His earrings glittered coldly, and his eyes were blank dark holes, without emotion or feeling, as he looked at the other man.

"I'll make it worth your while," he said shortly. "Three hundred for the diving, and five hundred bonus if you get what I want from the yacht."

Vince Carteret whistled softly. He'd spend many a week aboard the *Seagull* before he'd put that much money by. Yet the very amount thrust suspicion into his mind.

"What's down there?" he asked. "Hell, that yacht's been sunk for at least four years; why should you suddenly decide to dive for it?"

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Gregson shook his head. "Throw in with me and I'll tell you."

"Secrets?" Vince Carteret asked.

"Not necessarily," Gregson said coldly. "It's just that this is my baby. It's straight salvage and I figure on cleaning up."

Intrigued despite himself, Carteret leaned against the the counter. "Pearls?" he hazarded.

"It might be. But that isn't the point. Will you dive for me?"

"No!" Vince Carteret shrugged. "I've got the *Seagull* and open sea; that's enough for me."

"All right," the trader said and visibly relaxed. "If you change your mind, let me know."

"I'll do that," Carteret said and went toward the door.

"Meanwhile, I think I'll do the town; I've a few friends to see."

He went through the door and down the walk. Hull Gregson watched his broad back disappear and then swung toward the rear of the post.

"He's gone," he said conversationally.

The man who came through the bamboo curtain might have been an ape in dirty clothes. He shambled instead of walked, and his arms dangled low at his side. His head was close-cropped and bulging, piggish eyes sunk beneath cartilaginous brows. His chest bulged his shirt, and a sailor's knife was scabbarded at his hip.

"You talked too soft, Hull," he said. "You should have got rough."

Hull Gregson laughed. "Muscles aren't everything, Gratt," he said softly. "I think we'll bring Mr. Carteret into line." The laughter faded. "We've got to beat that dame to the yacht."

Gratt shuffled forward, reaching across the counter and finding the whiskey bottle.

"You figure it, you're so damned smart," he said, and took a drink. He shivered at the whiskey's bite and wiped his mouth. "But get this straight; I ain't going down by myself; this is a two-man job."

Hull Gregson was big and dangerous then, and the apelike Gratt suddenly backed a step, caught by the sheer menace of the other's expression.

"He'll work for use," Gregson said. "And keep a civil tongue in your head or there'll be trouble. Understand?"

"Yeah, I understand," Gratt sullenly and killed the last of the whiskey.

Hull Gregson was smiling again, his eyes as dead as shadow-ridden glass.

BUT, of course, Vince Carteret knew nothing of the conversation between Hull Gregson and Gratt. In fact, he had never heard of the apelike man. He was utterly content as he walked the street. He visited a bar and caught up on the island gossip, sipping his drinks slowly, liking the friendliness of the men about him. The bar was cool, punkahs swaying overhead, ropes whining gently as they were pulled by small boys. He relaxed, conscious of his position in the islands. He owned the *Seagull* outright, and he had good contracts which would make him independent from now on.

In looking back, it was hard to realize he had come so far in so short a time. As a Navy diver, doing salvage work, he had seen his share of war's destruction. Discharged, he had wanted nothing more than to find a peaceful part of the world where he could find quiet and a sense of security.

Here he had found that for which he had sought; he was his own master and he brought touches of the better part of civilization to the islands. Except for short vacations, he knew that this was to be his home for many years to come.

And so he talked to those who were his friends. Births and deaths and laughable incidents were related to him by Torangi who ran the bar, and the quiet humor of the gray-haired Polynesian was never forced or strange.

Vince Carteret asked questions, of course. He asked about Mona Stevens, asked casually, and flushed at the amusement in Torangi's eyes.

"She come three-four months ago," Torangi said. "Take over plantation. Good trader, make big success. Not like big Tuan, though, more hard."

"More hard!" Vince smiled, remembering the soft loveliness of the girl.

"More hard—what you say, businesslike, not like islands."

"Oh!" Carteret twisted his glass aimlessly. "What about the *Maukeena* at the foot of the Singing Cliffs; who owned her?"

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Torangi spread fat hands. "A man named Brook. The *Maukeena* came in during a storm. She sank, and only a few of the crew were saved."

"What about Brook; who was he?"

"Nobody knows much. He trader from Guinea. He dead in *Maukeena.*"

Vince Carteret nodded. It added up in his mind. Somehow, Gregson had found out something of value was on the yacht and wanted it. Probably pearls or money locked in the strongbox, honest salvage for anybody with the nerve to dive for it. This wasn't the first time such a thing had happened, nor would it be the last.

Despite himself, he felt a surge of interest at thought of diving again. Heavy shoes and clinging suit, green water sliding past the face plate, searchlight slashing a bright path through the growing gloom. There was adventure there. Little red and gold fish flirting feathery tails, and far back in the shadows, some gap-mouthed monster on the verge of raging attack. Yes, there was a thrill there which would never be entirely gone.

And yet, since he was satisfied, he felt no urge to go down again. Maybe some day, maybe never, but right now, no.

ROUSING from his thoughts, he said goodbye and went to his room. Wimpy was already there, unpacking a seabag, fresh clothes laid out on the bed.

"All shipshape, sar," he said, flashing white teeth. "Bath ready, right temperature, me fix."

"Right!" Vince Carteret said. "You can beat it now. I eat on hill at two bells, so have a good time. Report at eight bells in the morning."

"Aye, aye, sar!" Wimpy saluted smartly.

Vince shook his head amusedly, then undressed and lay for thirty minutes in the tin tub Wimpy had filled with warm water. Sunlight grayed as the minutes passed; and when at last he stood on the grass mat, towelling himself vigorously, the night was almost come, the sun a red blob near the horizon.

He dressed slowly, taking his time. He knotted a tie about his throat, feeling uncomfortable in its constricture. Fresh white trousers and jacket and white shoes composed his outfit. Satisfied, he viewed himself in the wavy-glassed mirror.

Maybe he was a schooner jockey now, and maybe the clothes were a bit sunfaded; but this was the islands, and a woman could hardly expect a man to appear as he would in the cities. He began to whistle softly, wondering what it would be like to have dinner with a white girl again; somehow, the thought was exciting.

He heard the cries outside, but gave no heed for the moment. Natives were excitable people; probably they cheered a cockfight. Then he caught the odor of smoke, and he swung about, pacing toward the window. He caught his breath, paralyzed at what he saw.

The *Seagull* burned. It burned in the growing night, flames raking her fore and aft, dancing up the mast and spreading with fantastic swiftness. Smoke roiled overhead, pillaring high. Already canoes were breaking from the dock, driven forward by heavy arms. But there was no saving of the schooner; she was completely aflame, a floating ball of fire.

"Dear God!" Vince Carteret whispered.

He dashed from the room, taking the stairs four at a time. Torangi was just on his way up, fat face creased with concern.

"What happened?" Carteret snapped.

"Don't know," Torangi said simply. "All same smoke and fire, too late to stop."

Carteret brushed by and ran through the doorway. Natives were streaming toward the dock, chattering and crying out in awe. Fire piled a hundred feet into the air.

Vince Carteret pushed through the mob, going forward and stopping at last at the far end of the structure. Grimness was on his face and a dull sickness in his stomach. Three years of work were going up in smoke, three years of work and seven years of savings.

And even as he watched, the *Seagull* went down by the head, lifting grandly and then tip-tilting and sliding under. Flames blacked out, steam rising whitely. Ashes and cinders and smoke lay thickly on the waters, marking the schooner's resting place.

Vince Carteret sighed and turned away. He sensed, rather than saw, the big man at his side. Glancing up, he caught the unsmiling expression on Hull Gregson's face.

"Tough luck," the trader said. "That sort of wipes you out, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it wipes me out," Vince Carteret

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agreed, and the words crystallized the dismay in his mind.

"Tough," Hull Gregson said again and turned away.

And if his shoulders moved slightly, as though he suppressed a laugh, Vince Carteret did not notice. Disaster had come, swiftly and unbidden, and there was no thought in Carteret's mind for the vagaries of others.

"Damn, damn, damn!" he said softly and bitterly and went with long steady strides toward the bar and a quiet drink.

II

IT WAS the morning after the sinking of the Seagull, and Vince Carteret sat on the edge of the dock, watching natives dive in the cool green water. Outriggers bobbed like slim insects on the surface, and slim, broad-chested men slanted downward easily, carrying rocks for weights to pull them to the bottom. Long seconds passed before they returned to the surface, blowing and gasping, yet their efforts had brought but little salvage of the schooner's effects.

Wimpy sat at Carteret's side, all happiness gone from his brown face now, and his eyes avoided those of the white man. He had not appeared until the morning, had known nothing of the burning; and now, sitting on the dock, he reproached himself again and again.

"Shut up, Mister," Vince Carteret said at last. "I've told you before that you did not leave the kerosene stove burning. The guard said he was attacked by looters. Evidently, they started the fire accidentally while searching."

Wimpy nodded. "What we do now, sar?" he asked.

Vince Carteret smiled ruefully. "Get another boat," he said shortly. "What kind, I don't know." He touched Wimpy's shoulder gently. "You'd better sign up on one of Gregson's boats."

Wimpy shook his head. "We navy men!" he said. "We stick together, plenty good."

Vince Carteret shook his head. "Eating is much better," he said. "Sign up on boat; maybe later, you come back to me."

"No!" Stubbornness came to the native's face, his dark eyes somber when they sought Carteret's.

"Okay!" the white man agreed.

He heard the light footsteps at his back and turned. Mona Stevens was on the dock, refreshingly cool in the hot sunshine. Her dress was white, a red collar V'd at the neckline, and her hair was a swirl of blackest midnight.

Carteret scrambled to his feet, towering over the girl. "I'm sorry about last night," he said.

Mona Stevens nodded. "I am, too," she said. "But I'm sorrier about your schooner. Has anything been salvaged?"

Vince Carteret shrugged. "Nothing worth saving," he said. "The fire ruined everything on board. The *Seagull's* a total loss."

They could hear the splashing and cries of the divers. A few gulls swooped and flew on long white pinions, and water lapped on the piles with a regular monotony. Vince Carteret was conscious of the girl now, even more than the afternoon before, and his breath caught in his throat.

"Do you have any plans now?" Mona asked.

"Not many," Vince admitted. "I've got to replace the *Seagull*, but I don't know if I can." He shrugged. "Nine thousand dollars doesn't grow on trees."

"That much!" the girl said.

"That much." He fumbled cigarettes from his shirt pocket. "After I've paid the crew and some other bills, there won't be much left."

"Good!" Mona Stevens said.

"Good?" Vince Carteret stared. "What's good about it?"

"Then perhaps you'll work for me," Mona said.

"Work for you?" Vince Carteret shook his head. "Sorry, Miss Stevens, but skippering a flock of coconut trees isn't my idea of fun."

"Not that—diving."

"Diving?" Vince Carteret involuntarily glanced at the Singing Cliffs, beneath which the *Maukeena* lay in a hundred feet of water.

The girl caught his gaze, and her own narrowed. "Yes," she answered. "I've the equipment; I had it sent from Melbourne. But the man I hired refused to go down."

"Why?" Vince Carteret asked, knowing the answer.

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"He said it was too risky, the currents twist too much for safety."

"You want the *Maukeena* salvaged?"

"That's right; how did you know?"

Carteret laughed. "I just guessed. It seems there's somebody else who'd like the *Maukeena's* treasure."

"Hull Gregson?"

"That's right."

Mona Stevens glanced at the town, then looked back at Carteret. "He hired Gratt away from me," she said. "They'll be going down before anybody else."

Vince Carteret winced instinctively at the harshness in her tone. There was a ruthlessness there he had never heard in a woman's voice, a swelling of ambition oddly at variance with her appearance.

"And if they do?" he prompted.

The girl touched his arm. "Mr. Carteret —Vince," she said, "there are fifty thousand dollars' worth of pearls in the *Maukeena's* cabin. Dive for me, using my equipment, and we'll share them equally."

"Fif—" Vince Carteret grinned. "Miss Stevens, somebody's sold you an island tale; if there were that many pearls there, somebody would have gone down for them years ago."

"Captain, sar?" Wimpy said from where he sat. "It is to excuse me, please." He grinned. "But is fortune there."

Vince Carteret frowned at the younger man. "What the devil are you talking about?" he asked. "You've never mentioned it before."

Wimpy shrugged. "We navy men," he said apologetically. "We traders; we no dive."

"What did you hear?" Mona Stevens asked suddenly.

"Well," Wimpy collected his thoughts. "Maluni—he made for Tuan Brook—was hurt when *Maukeena* sink. He not say anything. Then three-four month ago, he tell of treasure. Later, he die in accident."

"Pearls?" Vince Carteret asked.

"Don't know, just treasure, he say. I hear from friends what he say."

"There, you see!" Animation came to the girl. "That proves what I say." Her slender hand pointed toward a boat shed near the beach. "The diving equipment is there; take a look at it."

Vince Carteret shook his head. "I'm sorry, Miss Stevens," he said finally. "This man Gratt wasn't fooling; those waters are more than dangerous. Anyway, I'm out of practice."

Mona Stevens tapped her foot impatiently. "Vince," she said, "you're broke; you need money. There's at least twenty-five thousand dollars waiting for you for a few hours of work." Her face was flushed. "After the stories I've heard about you, I never thought to find you afraid of anything."

Cigarettes crumpled in Vince Carteret's hand. Color tided upward from his throat, and a first hint of anger came to his mind.

"It isn't fear," he said stiffly. "It's just that I want better proof of possible reward, before I risk my neck. Diving, particularly beneath those cliffs, isn't easy, at best."

"I'll pay you, then; you can't lose, that way. I'll pay you, and then, if you bring up the pearls, we'll still share equally."

Carteret turned his head. "You want those pearls pretty much, don't you," he said thoughtfully.

She laughed. "Wouldn't you?"

He shrugged. "It depends," he admitted.

"Well, you can use the money, you said so," Mona Stevens said sharply. "And unless you go down before Gregson, you'll lose your chance."

Vince Carteret straightened and lit a cigarette. All anger was gone from him now, and he stared silently at the girl for a moment. Then he shook his head.

"I've enough diving for any man," he said evenly. "Those waters need a two-man team, and I'd have to work alone. No, I think I'll get credit from Gregson and start trading again."

Anger came to Mona Stevens then, anger and a faint shadow of fear in her eyes. She stamped her foot.

"You fool!" she said. "Oh, you fool!"

She turned and walked away, and behind her Vince Carteret smiled in mild amusement.

"There goes an angry woman, Wimpy," he said.

"Bah!" Wimpy shrugged, scratching lazily at his woolly head. "More better you no bother with women," he observed. "Trouble all they bring."

Carteret grinned. "You're a pessimist," he observed. He came to his feet. "Let's go see Gregson."

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They left the dock, pacing up the shell path to the town. Lithe brown men waved from the copra sheds, pausing from their monotonous work of splitting coconut husks and shells and scooping out the white meat for drying. Children played in naked brownness, their laughter as gentle as the Trade Winds, while their mothers gathered at the stream edge, pounding dirt from clothes with ball rocks and supple fingers.

Vince Carteret sighed. Here lay peace, peace of body and quiet of mind. Civilization had touched this land and then moved on, spoiling it but little. He liked it here, and here he would remain until such times as he felt an urge to move.

The Singing Cliffs wailed softly in a minor key at his back, and the sound was laughter this morning, elfin and coaxing; and he wondered if any man could ever hear and not want to return to listen again.

He turned up the path to Gregson's post, thrusting open the screen door and stepping into the dim coolness. A huge ape-like man at a rear table turned his head and stared. Hull Gregson glanced up, then continued his trading of a bolt of red and yellow cloth for a pile of bird skins even brighter and softer.

Wimpy slid in after Carteret, squatting beside the door, dark eyes glancing about. Dislike lay in his face when he saw Gregson, then his features softened, and he half-dozed.

Vince Carteret went to the water tank at the rear, reaching for and uncapping a bottle of beer. It was cool from the water, and he savored it, leaning against the tank and watching the native take a strip of cloth in exchange for the skins. Then, with the native gone, he strolled to the counter, idly finishing the beer.

Hull Gregson lit a cigar, scratching at his shaven chin with the burned match. The stub made a rasping sound, and the perfume the man affected was almost feminine in the air.

"Salvage anything?" he asked.

Carteret shrugged. "Not enough to worry about," he admitted. "Cash box and a few odds and ends."

"Tough," Gregson said absently and placed the bright bird skins on a shelf. "Now what do you plan to do?"

"Keep trading, I hope."

"Using what, an outrigger!" Gregson said cynically.

Vince Carteret laid the brown bottle aside, flies swooping instantly to the mouth. "I've got contracts at Molukshi and Penter," he said, "and the chiefs at a couple of other islands might talk business."

Gregson shook his head. "Contracts don't mean a thing without a schooner," he said dryly.

"That's what I figured," Vince Carteret admitted. "That's why I want to talk to you. You've got three schooners, two active and one laid up. Suppose I take the third and go into trading again."

Hull Gregson shook his head. "I thought you were wiped out?" he asked doubtfully.

"I am," Carteret said. "But I've got the contracts, and you know how much I can do. Suppose you take me on tick, and I'll pay off as the copra comes in." He grinned, eyes wary. "I even pick up shell and a pearl now and then."

"No!" Gregson flicked ashes. "I give only so much credit. Why, schooner and all would amount to about ten thousand. I'm a business man, not Santa Claus."

The ape-like man grunted in sudden laughter, then pushed back his chair and strolled to the counter. His piggish eyes measured Carteret, and there was no friendliness in his gaze.

"This is Gratt Engler, he works for me," Gregson said shortly.

Carteret nodded without warmth, repelled by the very sight of the man. Few men touched him in such a way, and he felt muscles lift along his back as the other ranged at his side.

"I've heard of you," Gratt said. "Sort of figuring you're getting to be a big shot in the islands."

"Maybe," Carteret said, and swung to Gregson. "Well, how about it, do we deal?"

"Let's figure it another way," Gregson said and smoothed the pomaded hair into light waves with his fingers. "I can't just step out and risk ten thousand, not without some assurance of getting it back. Hell, one storm could put the schooner down."

Carteret flushed, feeling the first burning of anger. "Look," he argued, "I know these waters, and the contracts should clear me with you in two seasons."

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Hull Gregson examined the glowing end of his cigar. "I'll make a deal," he said. "Dive with Gratt here for the *Maukeena*, and I'll sell the schooner and supply it for five thousand." He smiled, eyes cold. "That's plenty big pay."

Carteret shook his head. "I'm through diving," he said slowly.

Gratt Engler spat in slow contempt. "Yellow?" he asked.

Vince Carteret turned his head. "Stay out of this," he said.

Gratt grinned, showing yellow teeth. "Keep me out," he invited.

"There's the proposition," Gregson broke in smoothly. "It figures five thousand for a few hours of work. Then you're back to trading again." He braced his hands on the counter. "I've got the newest diving tackle, self-tanked; except for the water, there won't be much danger."

Vince Carteret grinned without humor. "I've had a better deal than that offered me," he said. "I go down for Mona Stevens and share fifty-fifty in the pearls."

Hull Gregson came erect, frowning now, staring at Carteret's face. Slow laughter came to his eyes, and he shrugged in defeat, his gaze swinging to Gratt.

"All right," he said, "this is checkmate. You won't go down alone and Gratt won't dive by himself. Miss Stevens will probably bring in other divers before long." He blew oily smoke. "I'll make a deal; dive with Gratt, and we'll split three ways."

Gratt laughed rudely. "That is, if you've got the guts!" he said.

He crowded Carteret, coming close, deliberately crowding, and in him was a desire and an urge and a threat.

Vince Carteret moved a step, gaze going from man to man. "I don't want to dive," he said. "I like it on top; I got my belly full of diving in the service."

Gratt grinned, crowding in. "Send the little boy on his way, Hull," he said, and spat on Carteret's shoe.

Vince Carteret held himself motionless. "Wipe it off," he said.

Gratt flexed heavy fingers. "Wipe it off yourself," he said.

"Gratt!" Gregson snapped. "For the last time, Carteret, will you dive for me?"

Vince Carteret watched the ape-like man. "I've just decided something, Gregson," he said. "I'm diving for Mona Stevens."

Hull Gregson smiled, but hell swirled darkly in his eyes. "I wouldn't," he warned. "Don't buck me, Carteret."

Gratt spread his hands. "Let him buck us," he said slowly. "Come on, pretty boy, let's see how tough you are?"

Deliberately, viciously, he spat at Carteret's chest.

Vince Carteret moved, his hand flicking out and swooping up the empty beer bottle. He lashed with it, throwing the lean power of his arm and shoulder into the blow. He heard Gregson's instant cry and saw the instinctive reaction come to Gratt's head.

Then the blow struck, the sound loud and ugly, glass shattering and flying in a brown rain. Gratt went down slowly, almost squatting, eyes blank and cold. His breath came in a sudden gasp, and then he toppled to one side, lying without movement.

Carteret whirled, bottle neck a razor-edged deadly weapon in his fingers. He backed slowly; and behind, Wimpy came to his feet, knife in lean brown fingers.

"Keep him out of my way, Gregson," Vince Carteret said.

The trader leaned on the counter, gaze running from the slack body to Carteret. There was no emotion in his face, but his voice was thick with rage.

"He'll kill you for that," he said.

"Or I'll kill him," Carteret said harshly.

Gregson did not move, watching Carteret. "Last chance," he said, "to come in with me."

Vince Carteret grinned. "To hell with you."

Hull Gregson nodded. "Then don't dive for the girl," he said. "I'm warning you, Carteret, don't dive for the girl."

Vince Carteret paused at the door, seeing the first stirring in Gratt's body. Excitement touched him, some of the same feeling which had been his when he had been a Navy man, scavenging the flotsam of a war, death lying in wait at every movement.

"I'll dive where I damned well please," he said. "And what I said about Gratt goes for you, too. Stay out of my way."

He turned and was gone, the screen

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slamming to, flies dancing in startled flight through the sunshine beam.

And coming about the counter, cigar forgotten in the fingers of his left hand, Hull Gregson stood over the slumped body of Gratt Engler.

"You stupid damned ape!" he said in a vicious monotone.

He kicked Gratt, kicked savagely and bitterly and cruelly, and Gratt went slack again, blood staining his mouth.

And when he was through, Hull Gregson went to the door, peering into the sunshine, watching Carteret and Wimpy go along the road toward Torangi's. Earrings glittered at the sides of his head, and he touched one thoughtfully, eyes staring introspectively. After a time, he began to smile, and the smile was without warmth, without humor, without soul.

"Dive, damn you," he said softly, "and die."

III

FATHER GOMEZ peered blindly through his thick glasses and nodded his shaven head. "As far as my memory of the law serves," he said, "the *Maukeena* is clear salvage."

Vince Carteret grinned. "Good," he said. "I'm diving for it for Mona Stevens."

Father Gomez chuckled. "She's a very persuasive young lady, even though she has little time for an old priest. Of course, though, I've only been back a week, and then couldn't see her face."

"She's beautiful," Vince Carteret said, and flushed at the sudden smile on the other's face.

"I can imagine," Father Gomez agreed. "Her father was a handsome man, and although she has been gone from here for fifteen years, I still remember she was a rather pretty child."

He came to his feet, using his cane to guide him about the room, toward a wall bookcase. His fingers went familiarly over the volumes, and at last he turned, carrying a large album.

"You'll find a snapshot of her on the first page or so," he said. "She will have changed, of course, but I've written identities under each picture."

Vince Carteret spread the album, turning the pages slowly. He found the picture, and smiled. Mona was like a blonde flame among the Polynesian children. Her hair was a tousled mop, and she grinned without embarrassment, two teeth missing and making a dark gap in her smile.

"I've found it," he said.

"Well, take it to her," the priest replied. "It will be my coming-home gift to her."

"I'll do it," Carteret said, still smiling.

Father Gomez chuckled. "It may amuse her to see how she once looked," he said. His knowledge of the Islands went back a very long way.

"Or embarrass her," Carteret chuckled, remembering the sleek beauty of the girl now.

He removed the snapshot from its paper clips and placed it in his pocket. Standing, he held out his hand.

"Thanks for the information, Father," he said.

"I feel a lot better, knowing this is a case of 'finders keepers.' "

"You're welcome." Father Gomez touched his beads. "And take care," he admonished, "those waters are treacherous."

"I'll watch it," Vince Carteret promised and left the house.

He whistled cheerfully as he went down the path which led to the town. Wimpy trailed at his side, saying nothing, lazily content.

Ahead, Carteret could see the crude diving raft he had constructed in the past two days. Natives had cut huge palms and *daukta* trees and trimmed them into equal lengths. Lashed and nailed together, they had become the foundation on which Carteret had laid a flooring and three-foot sides. Securely bolted to it was the air-compressor and its gasoline engine, and close by gleamed the copper helmets of the diving suits.

Vince Carteret would have preferred self-tanked suits, for then he could have moved more freely below the surface, without danger of snagging his air hose. But Mona Stevens had bought the other kind, and so they must be used.

He could see her now, waiting at dockside, peering up at him. She waved, and he lifted his arm in a quick salute. He was

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a bit amazed at the way in which the sight of her brought eagerness to his steps.

Turning his head, he could see the curving terraces of the coconut plantation which was hers. Wealth lay there, nothing spectacular, but a steady income which would make life for Mona Stevens more than easy. She would never want for anything. Carteret shook his head a bit, thinking of the life which lay ahead for him. Trading, at best, was fairly precarious, and one storm, one accident, could wipe him out at any time.

He grinned. Not that it mattered. His needs were few, and anyway, at the moment he was broke. The future held nothing but promise, and he was eager to meet its challenge. And if the *Maukeena* held its supposed wealth, he would be better off than ever before in his life.

"Is okay?" Wimpy said at his side, and he nodded.

"Is plenty okay, Mister," he said. "Come another month and we have a new schooner, a new refrigerator and plenty—" He grinned. "Of hamburger!"

Wimpy licked his lips in thoughtful anticipation. "Good!" he said.

Vince Carteret lost his smile. "Now I want you to listen," he said carefully. "You've skin-dived plenty, but this will be your first time in a suit. I don't want any mistakes. Don't do anything but stay close to me. If you get scared, if you think you can't breathe, don't lose your head. Air will be there, and you'll be pulled up at once if any trouble comes."

Wimpy shrugged disdainfully. "I never afraid in life, sar," he said. "We go down; we do job, and then we come up. Okay?"

"Okay!"

They paced through the town, going down the shell path to the dock. Three outriggers waited, Kanakas squatting idly on the dock. They grinned as the pair approached and then slid into the canoes, balancing easily.

"What took you so long?" Mona Stevens asked. "It's getting late."

Carteret grinned. "At that depth it doesn't mean a thing," he said. "Have to use the lights anyway." He glanced at the huge diving platform anchored at the base of the Singing Cliffs. "Everything all right; Gregson tried to interfere?"

Mona Stevens shook her head, dark hair swirling. "He and Gratt watched for a while, but did nothing. They're back at the post now."

"Good. Let's get going."

They slid into the outriggers, and the Kanakas wielded pointed paddles with casual skill, sending the canoes across the water like monstrous water-insects.

The cliffs began to loom, seeming to rise out of the water. Their singing was a soft moaning now, like that of a giant restless in his sleep. Vince Carteret listened, marvelling again.

The outriggers pitched a bit, yet went smoothly forward. The surface was so calm it was hard to believe that rip-currents twisted in vicious strength only a few yards down.

They came to the platform, climbing over the one unprotected side from which the dives would be made. Outriggers were tied fast, and Wimpy gave last-minute instructions to the Kanakas, as though the men were strangers instead of Carteret's old crew.

"Let air die, do not pull us up on signal," he said, "and we come back to haunt your nights."

Vince Carteret grinned, then went toward the diving suits. While the girl turned her back, he stripped to long underwear and heavy socks, then wriggled into the suit. That much he could do alone; the rest must be done by the others. He fastened the suit, then rose and clumped about on lead-soled shoes, helping Wimpy into his suit. Dressed, they stood for a moment, gazing about.

Carteret bent over the engine, twisting the flywheel, then flipping it into motion. The engine backfired, then settled into a steady roar, exhaust billowing blue smoke. He made fine adjustments, then turned away, satisfied.

Air roared into the helmets, and a flick of switches disclosed the underwater lights were working properly. His glance went over the coiled air hoses, over the hand-turned drum on which the life lines were coiled. Everything was as ready and perfect as he could make it.

He sat on the edge of the platform, Wimpy at his side, and the helmets were lifted and settled over their heads.

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Cogs came tight to the shoulder frames. Face plates were open, and air rushed steadily from the head tubes. Carteret made adjustment to the valves, checking Wimpy's, then fumbled for the heavy lead belt.

Hands fitted it about his waist, weighting him down. More weight than usual was being used, for the currents were swift and extra weight was needed.

"Well, here we go," Carteret said to Mona Stevens and grinned.

"Luck," she answered, and he reached up and dogged his face plate closed.

"Can you hear me?" Mona's voice came over the telephone, and he answered.

He turned awkwardly, checking on Wimpy, and the native's face grinned out of the copper headpiece, eyes bright and excited, teeth incredibly white.

"Let's go," he said, knowing Wimpy could not hear, and dropped over the side.

He went down slowly, water sneaking up his body, until at last he was completely in. He could see Wimpy at his side, dangling like a puppet from the life line. Then he was being pulled to one side by his own line, so that he would not tangle with the other.

Pressure increased, and he adjusted his valve, letting air into the suit, compensating for pressure. Bubbles hissed from the overflow valve, rustling upward toward the dark shadow which was the platform.

The currents caught him, not as badly as he had thought they would, and he was glad of the extra weight on his suit. Fishes flickered by, goggling, then flirting away, water becoming darker and more green, then slowly settling into shadowed darkness.

He cut in his light, swaying like a doll on a string, and the beam was a scimitar slashing through the water. A goggle-eyed fish stared in wonder, then slipped aside.

"Is Wimpy okay?" he asked into the phone. "Tell him to let in air until bubbles begin to leak from his cuffs."

It seemed to him that he did not move, yet he knew he was sinking rapidly. The currents were stronger here, and fish were not so deep. Except for the bubbles racing upward, and the sliding of water past the light, he might have been suspended motionless.

He saw the first shadow of the bottom, and when his feet touched, he called a halt to the lowering. A searchlight flared fifty feet away, and he signalled, until it moved toward him. Then he turned slowly, oily air pushing at his head from the air line, ceasing his turning when he spied the sunken yacht.

"I see the *Maukeena,*" he said into the phone. "Give me slack, and I'll take a looksee."

Life line and air line dropped slowly toward him, and the current almost swept him off his feet. It was not as bad as he had figured it would be, yet he was glad that the other diver was close at hand.

He walked toward the yacht, bending against the water. He had the same sensation as came in dreams, that of walking without moving. Water was a solid surface, yielding grudgingly. Sand spewed up beneath his feet, drifting in small clouds. Huge limestone blocks lay to one side, debris of the Singing Cliffs which towered two hundred feet overhead. The bed was almost entirely sand and small rocks, all other debris swept away by the ceaseless spinning currents.

He came to the yacht. It lay almost on its side, sand drifted along the exposed side, the bow battered and ripped open like a crushed crate. Barnacles and minute shell life had covered the exposed surfaces of the keel and bottom until no wood or metal was exposed.

His air hose caught for a moment, and he went cold, feeling the first surge of panic. Once, years before, he'd spent eighteen hours below, trapped, and the memory of his terror came swirling back, choking him for the moment.

Then the line came free, and he laughed aloud, realizing that the line had not fouled, that he was but fighting it against the current.

"Are you all right?" Mona's voice said anxiously in his ears.

"Okay," he said. "I'm circling now."

HE WENT carefully along the side, watchful of his lines; and when he found the place he wanted, he climbed soft rock and sand and edged his way up the slanting deck.

He found the cabin entranceway, but the storm's weight had broken the wood and

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steel, and now he could not force his way in by hand. He tugged experimentally, then ceased, knowing his strength was not enough.

"Trouble," he said into the phone. "I'm aboard, but the cabin is partially crushed. I'll have to blow a passage."

"Now?" Mona Stevens' voice was unnatural and tiny in the headset.

He turned slowly, light cutting a path through the water. He could see Wimpy at the yacht's side. Air rushed into his helmet, and the excess spilled from the flutter valve, streaking toward the surface. He was sweating, despite the chill of the water.

"Tell Wimpy I'm sending him up," he said. "Then slide a stick of gelignite along the life line. I'll set it, then back off. You spark the blast when I give the signal."

"You'll be all right?" He could sense the strain in her body.

"I'll be all right," he assured her. "Lord, this is old stuff to me. Now, pull Wimpy up and send the explosive down."

He saw Wimpy begin to move. He lifted, swinging in the current, twisting a bit; and then he was going faster, stopping now and then for decompression, his light a long streak of yellow flame in the cold water.

Minutes passed, slow torturous minutes in which there was only the hissing roar of the air into his suit. He was alone with his thoughts, and his memory conjured up many things, kisses and fights and friends and enemies—and suddenly he was glad that he was alive, triumphantly glad.

"I'm sending down the explosive," the headset said. "Wimpy is up."

"Okay!" Carteret said.

He could hear and feel the vibration of the ring-slide on the lifeline. The sound rasped, and he lifted his hand, circling the line with cold fingers, waiting. Metal touched his fingers, and he found the catch and unloosened the gelignite.

Barely six inches long, a corkscrew tip at one end for anchoring in wood, the other end held a fine wire which trailed to the surface. He held the explosive gingerly, a bit amused at his caution, for the explosive was absolutely stable except when excited by a spark.

Carefully, he placed the cartridge in position, lifting stone and scooping sand over it. Satisfied, he straightened, backing away, careful not to foul the wire with his own lines. He scrambled from the yacht deck, going yards away, then hiding behind a huge block of stone.

"Blow it," he said.

"All right," Mona Stevens' voice said.

There was a puff of light, a slow boiling of water. The scene was like a movie in slow motion. Lazily, rocks and sand lifted, sand whisked away by the current, rocks settling slowly back. The yacht shuddered, and smoky gas balled and drove upward to the surface.

Shock waves came, battering against the rock, then passing on. Vince Carteret drew a heavy breath, bracing himself, rocking in the shock wave. Then the scene was as it had been before, his light slashing toward the yacht, where now a hole gaped in place of the cabin entranceway.

"It looks good," he said into the phone, and fought his way back to the yacht. Sounds came over his headset, but they made no sense and he ignored them.

He climbed the slanting deck, going cautiously, for explosives behave trickily beneath water. Any moment he might find himself trapped in the shifting debris of the yacht left by the explosion.

He came to the gap, and his light went in, its weird radiance swinging about. A skull rolled gently on the floor, watching him from sightless sockets, and he shivered. This must be Brooks. The skeleton lay about, disarticulated, and he lifted his light, shaken.

He could see the safe, partly ajar, and excitement touched his heart. His breath was suddenly hot in his throat.

"I've found the safe, Mona," he said. "Give me slack and I'll take a look inside the cabin."

"Here's the slack, Carteret," Hull Gregson's voice said weirdly over the headset. "Take it, sucker."

Then there was silence, led by the sound of metal grating on metal, then utter silence.

"Mona! Gregson!" Vince Carteret shouted.

His light went out, and he was in blackness. The phone was dead, and suddenly he felt the weight of the airline pressing down, tilting him. Water gushed, spraying his head, and blindly he reached up and

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closed the valve. Panic was a bitter black wave of agony. He knew now what had happened; he'd seen it happen before accidentally.

Gregson had cut his life and airlines. He was trapped a hundred feet down.

"Dear God!" Vince Carteret whispered.

He had but bare minutes of air in the suit. He couldn't rise against the drag of the air and lifelines. Madly, he swung the sea knife from his belt, hacking frenziedly at the hose, feeling it part before his efforts.

He cut the hose and the lifeline, then slashed at the lead belts about his waist. His lungs were straining now, and he could feel a blackness coming to his eyes even more ebon than the sea itself. He gasped, fear plucking at his mind.

The first belt came free, and buoyancy came to him. The current caught at his suit, pulling, plucking, and still he cut at the second belt. His one chance lay in floating to the surface, and the weight must be removed.

The second belt came free, and he squatted, mouth gaping for air now, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs of unconsciousness from his mind. There was no time for thinking; there were left only instinctive reactions.

He sprang, throwing himself upward, hoping the air in the suit would counterbalance his weight. The current caught him, throwing him up and over and then flinging him along at a reckless pace.

He gasped, realizing the suit was holding him down. He was totally blind, hurtling along in space. Faintness was in his mind, and a sudden shattering blow drove all air from his lungs. He twisted over and over, arms outflung, knife grasped in a deathlike grip. Stone scraped his fingers, and he clutched for safety. Then he was spun up and about, and the current drove him against another stone block, and he blacked out.

He felt the torture of his lungs; fire lay in them, and their agony raced through him with quicksilver speed. He cried out at the last cruel blow. He fought for breath, and his free hand came up, fumbling at the dogs on his face plate. The current smashed him against the base of the Singing Cliffs, and he sagged inertly.

One last thought he had, one last thought which made no sense, but which amused him. *No more hamburger for Wimpy!* he thought; then blackness rolled completely over his senses and he knew no more.

And above, the last beams of sunshine sparkling on its white face, the Singing Cliffs cried out in its myriad voice, keening and crying as though lamenting the dead.

IV

FAR away a great voice susurrated in a monotone, close at hand water splashed and rolled. He could feel the tug of the current on his legs, and when he fought instinctively to raise himself, he found his right arm locked about a shaft of smooth stone.

For long moments Vince Carteret lay motionless, wondering why he was not dead. He could feel the pulse of air across his face; and when he lifted his left hand, the knife scraped across the copper helmet and he found that he had undogged the face plate and that it had swung open.

His body ached dully, and in shifting, he wondered if his ribs had been broken. He could see nothing; there was no light; there was only the sound of the sea washing at him.

Gradually, his senses returned, and gingerly, he moved, feeling the shelving rock beneath him, turning like some ball-headed monster in the blackness, trying to discover where he was.

Panic struck, blind unreasoning panic. The first relief at being alive disappeared, and he almost cried out. He was in a cage, a cage of smooth water-worn stone, the floor sloping into water which suddenly had no bottom. His outstretched hands could touch the sidewalls; and the knowledge came to him that he was within the bowels of the Singing Cliffs.

He shuddered, sitting now, terror crowding his nerves. One chance he had, one infinitesimal chance, and that lay through the water, back through the hole into which the twisting current had flung him.

He forced sanity into his mind, forced calmness into his thinking. The suit would be a hindrance, nothing more; and because he could not take it from his rangy body in the normal way, he slashed the heavy fabric with his knife, peeling it away and emerg-

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ing like a crab from a too-small shell. Dressed only in heavy underwear, socks and his knitted cap, he stood in ankle-deep water and gathered courage for the dive.

He considered his chances and found them non-existent. The cliff was pocked with water-worn holes, but how deep they extended into the stone, he did not know. He might drown before reaching the open water. And then, once free, he would be but a twisting bit of flotsam in the wicked currents outside.

He shivered, chill air thrusting at him, and decision came hard.

He heard the voice of the cliff far overhead, and it laughed at him in guttural mockery. A thought came, and he tilted his head upward, striving to pierce the blackness. Air was here, fresh air, and it could not come through the water.

He went about the walls again, searching, prodding with blind hands. The voice mocked him with meaningless words. He reached higher, straining, and just as his hopes faded, he found the mouth of the air tube.

It was funnel-shaped, worn by water. His hands clawed for purchase. He moved back, finding the diving suit and bundled it into a step, until at last he could reach into the breathing hole.

His fingers found rounded protuberances, and he scrambled upward, socked toes scrabbling for purchase, until at last he was in the hole. His breath rasped in his throat, and he licked his lips, wondering if this might be the solution.

He went upward, the hole slanting and twisting. Skin scraped from his fingers, and he drew his shoulders in, forcing himself through narrow spaces. He couldn't hear the voice of the cliff now, for his own breathing echoed in his ears. Cloth broke at each knee, and he could feel the rupturing of skin. The hole was no longer as smooth as before, sandstone gravel biting into his flesh.

He paused, lying prone, hands outstretched, fighting for breath. Panic lay close to his mind, and he fought away its black shadows. He was like a rat in a warren, and to die in here would be all the more horrible because of the blackness and loneliness.

He could hear the Singing Cliffs about him. The stone was alive, vibrations touching him. The tunnel seemed smaller, as though clinging to him, holding him back, and he fought the gray tinge of fear. He could feel air pulsing over his body, as though he were in the vein of some huge monster, caught like a microbe in a rushing vein.

HE WENT ahead, thrusting through chimneys which widened and closed, keeping the knife in his hand, fearful of losing it. Twice he chopped at the semi-soft stone, cutting his way, wondering if he would ever get through.

He saw the light then. It was but a dot of brilliance and it cast no rays. It was like a moon, after the darkness, and he caught his breath in desperate hope. He went ahead, clawing, knees and toes driving him on, fingers plucking for purchase.

The last twenty feet almost trapped him. Stone was sharp, catching at his hips, and he forced himself along, feeling cloth and flesh rip, not heeding now. He could smell the night, and the odor gave him strength.

And then, at last, he was free, emerging like a mole, bloody and worn, breathing in great sucking gasps as though he had been drowning below the surface of the rock. He pulled himself into the growing moonlight, and lay on his back, a prayer of thanks in his heart, his chest heaving in the ecstasy of breathing.

For moments he lay there, not moving, conscious only of relief. Slowly, thoughts drifted back into his mind, and with them came anger, brutal blinding rage at Hull Gregson.

He rolled to hands and knees, then came upright. He was a hundred feet from the edge of the cliff, and he went that way, standing erect and peering down at the water.

He saw the raft, a spot of brilliance on the surface of the water. Two gasoline lanterns flared whitely, and in their light, he could see three men moving about. Squinting, he could discern two others, a woman and a man, lying to one side, either dead or unconscious.

He heard the rapid exhaust of the compressor and generator engine, and he knew then that Gratt had gone below to recover the *Maukeena's* treasure.

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He turned away, chilled from cooling perspiration and sea water, feeling the ache in his body. He began to run, taking careful steps, and within seconds he was at the rear of the cliff, taking the crude path to the town.

He knew now how dangerous Hull Gregson was. He hadn't realized the murderous potentialities of the man before. Gregson had coldly sentenced him to death below, and now Gratt was diving for the pearls. Only one thing could stop him—force; and Vince Carteret knew he could not accomplish victory alone.

He went down the path and along the back edge of the town. He heard soft laughter from the houses, and far away some native sang a weird lonely song of courtship to a dusky maid.

His feet made no sound as he entered the rear of Torangi's small hotel. Without pause, he went upstairs to his room, finding fresh clothing in the darkness. Sneakers hurt his lacerated feet, but he had no time for bandaging them. He slipped into trousers and then buckled a gun-belt about his waist. A fingercheck showed the weapon was loaded.

His anger was a steady thing now, born of the last desperate hours. He stood hesitantly for a moment, gathering his thoughts. No law was on the island, of course; the Commissioner was not due for a week yet. His only hope lay in Torangi and the natives.

He went from his room and down the front stairs, Torangi glancing up and waving a friendly hand from behind the bar. A few natives lounged at the rear of the room, sucking at warm bottles of sarsaparilla.

"A drink, Tuan?" Torangi asked, and then his eyes widened as he saw the bruises on the white man's face and hands.

Carteret nodded an answer to the silent question. "Hull Gregson," he explained. "Look, Torangi, I need your help, yours and that of all the men you can round up."

He spoke fast, feeling time running out. He told of all that had happened, and gradually all good humor faded from the face of the big Polynesian, slow anger building.

"I help," he said simply. "Friends help, too."

He spun about, and the soft syllables of his tongue became harsh and urgent. Men came to their feet at the rear of the room, exchanging glances, and then turned to run outside.

"They get others," Torangi said simply.

Vince Carteret sighed deeply, feeling the fatigue draining all strength from his rangy body. "I'll have that drink now," he said, and drank in one quick gulp.

They went from the room and across the shell walk and down the path to the sea. Carteret's gun was heavy at his hip, and Torangi carried a trade rifle which threw a whining home-cast slug the size of a man's thumb. Shadows drifted behind them, resolving into running men, until at last fully thirty natives were with them as they paced ahead. They were armed, crudely but effectively, with gleaming cane knives and trident-pronged fish spears. They were utterly menacing in their simplicity of purpose.

Vince Carteret slipped over the dock edge and into the first outrigger. He caught up the leaf paddle, waiting, while other canoes were slid into the water, men clambering agilely aboard. Impatience tugged at him. Mona Stevens and Wimpy might be dead by now, witnesses removed.

Torangi's voice came in a soft whisper which barely carried over the waiting craft. Voices answered; and then the outriggers were sweeping forward, making only the slightest of sounds. The canoes spread out in a half-moon, obscured now by the darkness of a drifting cloud.

The seconds passed, slow interminable seconds when time stood still and the world was tension. Ahead, lanterns bobbed on the raft, and the thunder of the gasoline motors deafened the raft's occupants to the slight noises made by the oarsmen. A shadow moved in the light; Hull Gregson bulking over the machinery.

Vince Carteret swung his outrigger to the back of the raft, raising his paddle to fend, still striving for quiet. But the outrigger bumped, and Hull Gregson whirled, eyes wide and startled in the light.

"Who's there?" he cried, blinded by the light.

And without waiting for a reply, he fired.

The bullet slashed at the night with the sound of ripping cloth. Involuntarily, Vince Carteret ducked, wincing at the sound. The

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outrigger rocked precariously, and he dropped the paddle, catching his balance.

Hull Gregson fired twice more, bracing wide-spread legs, blinking past the coccoon of light and into the semi-darkness. A man screamed briefly, then moaned, and Carteret knew one of the natives was hit.

He fired twice, jerking the gun. But the shifting of the outrigger destroyed his aim, and the slugs slid uselessly into the night. He was a perfect target in the spilling lanternlight, and Hull Gregson took deliberate aim, his heavy face rocky and set.

The fish spear whirled out of nowhere. It was a wicked weapon, eight feet long and with three barbed spears of polished steel. It fled like a streak of light through the lantern glow, and then it sank deep, catching Hull Gregson low in the chest, driving deep, impaling him as though he were a shark.

He screamed once, driven backward by shock. The gun roared in reflex in his hand, and then he was clutching the spear, tearing it free, without realization of what he did.

He died on his feet, his eyes staring incredulously at the spear in his hands, crimson pumping from the three wounds in his chest. He went down slowly, buckling at the knees, and when he struck the deck he was dead, hands twitching gently and then relaxing.

"Aaiiee! A good cast!" Torangi's voice said pridefully from behind Vince Carteret.

But Carteret was not listening. He was scrambling aboard the raft and plunging toward Mona Stevens and Wimpy. They lay supinely, hands and feet bound with light rope, crude gags tied securely in their mouths. Only their eyes watched, and gladness lay in them.

Vince Carteret caught up a knife and cut the ropes, watching as the captives tore the gags free, working their mouths and tongues for relief.

"We thought you were dead!" Mona Stevens cried, and tears sprang unbidden to her eyes.

"Not yet," Vince Carteret said briefly, and his hand touched Wimpy's shoulder in comradeship.

Wimpy grinned. One eye was bruised and closed, but his smile was confident. He rubbed his wrists.

"Navy men no die such-like," he said scornfully.

The raft rocked beneath the weight of crowding natives. Torangi was first aboard, and now he swung about and gave quick orders. Men slipped overside again, taking no chances on capsizing the platform.

"Now for Gratt," Carteret said.

He reached for the lifeline, and Mona Stevens' voice stilled the movement.

"He's pinned," she said. "He went down to the *Maukeena* and a beam pinned him."

Cold sweat soaked Vince Carteret's body. All the terror of those trapped minutes below seared his mind. He sucked a deep breath.

"How long?" he asked.

"An hour, at least," the girl answered. "Gregson was afraid to dive after him."

Vince Carteret licked his lips, calculating. Gratt could have but little oxygen now; the suits weren't made for long immersion. Instinctively he reached for the telephone headset.

"Gratt," he said, "can you hear me?"

"Who—my God, is that you, Carteret!" Gratt's strained voice came tinnily over the receiver. "I thought—"

"What's wrong?" Carteret snapped.

He heard the sobbing terror in the big man's voice; it brought a quiver to the muscles of his back.

"The cabin beam is across my back," Gratt said frantically. "I can't move; I'm pinned on my belly. For God's sake, man, get down here and torch me free!"

"No!" Vince Carteret said, and the word was instinctive.

"You can't let me die, you can't. For the love of God, Carteret, come down here. Gregson will pay; he'll pay plenty."

"Gregson's dead," Carteret said flatly, and his eyes swung to the body a yard away.

"Dead?"

"Yes. He stopped a fish spear."

He heard the gasp of surprise. Then the voice rang frantically again.

"Look, Carteret, my oxygen's almost gone. No matter what you think, you can't let me die down here. There's a torch there. Bring it down and cut me free."

Vince Carteret shook his head, and the fear was as thick as phlegm in his throat. He could still remember the minute when

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the rolling currents had spun him like a toy into the cliff.

"Tuan!" Torangi said at his back.

He looked about, sweat beading his face. He saw the compassion in the old man's eyes.

"No!" he said.

"You can't do it, Vince," Mona Stevens said. "You know he'll die."

Vince Carteret backed a step, licking dry lips. "He tried to kill me," he said, and his voice scaled. "I've had enough; I won't go down again."

HE SAW the faces of the natives. They watched, understanding, their eyes shadowed against all thought. Mona Stevens was at his right, and ahead was gray-haired Torangi, patiently waiting. Then Wimpy swung the balance.

"Navy men no quit," he said distinctly.

Vince Carteret smiled despite himself. Wimpy had a knack of using the few English words he knew. "I'm coming down," he said into the telephone, and then turned toward the extra suit.

Torangi and Wimpy helped him into the suit. They strapped lead soles to his feet and then buckled an extra tank on his back for the oxy-hydrogen torch. He was grateful that the suit was self-contained; at least there would be no airline dragging its weight against his body.

Wimpy dogged the helmet, and he tested the air valves, reassured by the steady hissing. He watched Torangi check the lifelines, then aided by the two men, he shuffled to the edge of the raft, sitting and swinging his legs overside.

He forced a grin, staring through the face port at Mona Stevens' white face.

"Pearls come high," he said bleakly, then closed the port, Wimpy handed him the oxy-hydrogen torch and igniter, attaching them to the tank connections. Vince Carteret swallowed hard.

He felt huge and unwieldly, and his hands were clumsy as he gripped the torch apparatus. Then he dogged shut the face plate and slid from the platform.

He went into instant darkness, although a few yards away he could see the reflection of light from the platform. His suit carried him down fast, and he adjusted the air valves until the hissing was even and comforting. His fingers found the suit light, and he clicked it on.

The seconds passed, slowly, monotonously. He swung at the end of the lifeline, the currents, and his breath caught in his throat, remembering the horror-filled minutes he had experienced but hours before. Almost did he call out to be pulled back up; then the knowledge of Gratt's fate stung his mind, and he was silent, waiting for bottom to be reached.

The seconds passed, slowly, monotonously. He swung at the end of the lifeline, taut with unspoken dread. Then the light touched bottom, and he braced his legs, landing awkwardly.

"On the bottom," he said into the phone. "Give me slack."

He saw the glow from Gratt's undersea light and went that way, stumbling against the pressure of the water, going slowly but surely, the lifeline offering little resistance to the restless currents.

He came to the forepeak of the *Mankeena* and went about it, coming to the slanted deck. His light centered on the golden ball which was Gratt's head, and he scrambled up the deck, pausing at last beside the trapped man.

He nodded to himself. The explosion had shifted beams, and one now lay across Gratt, pinning him down, evidently broken loose when the man had caught for a hold while clambering about the cabin.

He saw the square box lying a yard away from Gratt's outstretched hand. Gratt had found the treasure and was just making his way clear when disaster had struck.

Vince Carteret squatted, laying his helmet against Gratt's. "Are you all right?" he asked.

He felt the jerk of Gratt's helmet. Almost like an echo, Gratt's voice sounded tinnily in his ears.

"Just pinned," he answered. "I don't think anything's broken."

"Good! I'll have you free within minutes."

He straightened, light flowing over the partially-exposed beam. It was steel, corroded now, but still too strong to damage except with a torch.

He checked the oxy hose, turning the tip away and adjusting the valves. Gas exploded in a steady stream, bubbles breaking

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away and flashing upward. He tripped the spark trigger, and flame shot a foot from the tip, yellow at the edges, a splinter of blue next to the tip. He adjusted valves until the flame was no longer than a glistening match.

THE cutting flame bit against exposed metal, sparks jumping outward to a watery death. Steel changed color, blueing, then reddening, and then growing almost white with heat. Metal droplets flowed away, and the flame walked through the beam at a visible pace.

"Is everything all right?" Mona Stevens' voice asked, and he grunted a reply, intent upon his task.

The flame went through and beyond the beam; and Carteret moved about Gratt, careful of the torch, until he was at the other side. He wondered what must be the man's thoughts, for Gratt's face plate was turned downward; he was unable to see what was happening.

He turned the torch onto the beam again, notching its flame into the steel, watching it eat greedily at incredible speed. Gratt was bucking now, straining upward, striving to help.

The beam bent, then broke, and Gratt was free, coming upward like some grotesque unworldly monster. Carteret aided him with his free hand, torch to one side.

Their helmets touched, and Gratt's voice sounded dimily. "Thought I was a goner; not much air left."

Vince Carteret smiled grimly, wryly amused at the ironic twist the affair had taken.

"I'll go on up," he said. "Then we'll pull you up."

He turned away, bending to grasp the treasure box. Only the movement saved him. Steel rasped gratingly on copper, and the force of the misdirected blow almost threw him off balance. He saw the flicker of the knife blade in Gratt's hand, and then he was turning with a clumsy speed.

He saw the knife darting in, and instinctively his hands went out to stop it. Gratt moved squarely into the flame of the oxy-hydrogen torch, walking into it, driving into it. And when he stopped, the flame had burned a path across his chest, and he was drowning in the water which blasted into his ruptured suit with an incredible force.

The knife fell, and Gratt clawed clumsily at the suit. He spun about, hands ripping at his face plate. He fell, toppling, and in that instant he strangled to death.

"Oh, my God!" The words were a prayer on Carteret's lips.

The telephone squawked, and Mona Stevens' voice rushed through. "What is it, Vince, what has happened?"

Vince Carteret swallowed, sickened, futility beating at his mind.

"Gratt tried to kill me with a knife," he said slowly. "I cut his suit with the torch. He's dead."

He heard the gasp and then the muted words as she explained to the others. Then her voice came down again, coldly unreal.

"Bring the treasure box," she said.

"I've got it," he answered. "When I'm free of the ship, I'll signal and you bring me up." He turned his eyes to Gratt's battered body again. "You can bring Gratt up now," he finished.

HE LEFT the shattered yacht, careful to make no misstep. Currents tugged at him, but now there was no fear in his mind. His light scimitared a path ahead, and he went doggedly forward, torch and igniter in one hand, the other cuddling the treasure box to his side.

"Bring me up," he said at last, and felt the rope tighten to carry him to the surface.

The ascent was ages-long. He waited out the decompression stops, swinging like a monkey on a string. Automatically, he regulated the pressure of his suit, and once he laughed aloud, almost drunk on the high oxygen. The phone was silent, and he did not want to talk.

He surfaced, and willing hands dragged him onto the raft. His face port was undogged, and then he was being stripped of his suit, mutely glad the dragging weight was gone, breathing deeply of the night air.

"You okay, sar?" Wimpy asked, and he nodded in reply.

He saw the bulk which was Gratt on the raft edge. His gaze swung up and caught Torangi's. Torangi smiled.

"We tell Commissioner what we know. It be all right," he said.

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Vince Carteret stood, stretching heavy tired arms. He could see the strain on Mona Stevens' face, and his hand touched her shoulder reassuringly.

"It's over," he said, and a trace of bitterness came to his voice. "I hope it was worth what it cost."

But she wasn't listening. She was bent over the small treasure box, struggling with the lock, trying to force it with her bare hands. Torangi and the natives watched silently, and Carteret reached out and caught up a heavy wrench.

"This way," he said, and broke the lock with a smashing blow. Metal spanged, and then the lid was free, the spanner breaking away the shellcrust.

His fingers went into the contents, flinging papers aside and finding the small buckskin bag. He rolled the treasure into his palm.

And then he was laughing, laughing with the hot dry bitterness of a man who realizes he has been betrayed. He lifted his hand so that Mona Stevens might see, and his voice was hard and angry.

"For this I damned near died," he said. "For this two men were killed. Here's your fortune, Mona Stevens—look at it!"

Rolling in his palm, coldly-white in the light, was a single pearl, a baroque, ill-shaped, worth at most twenty dollars.

"Look at it!" Vince Carteret said bitterly, and then he flung it into the sea. Incredibly, like an echo to the throw, Mona Stevens laughed.

V

IT WAS night again, and pukahs moved gently near the ceiling of the screened porch, stirring the cool air. The Commissioner sat stiffly in his cane-bottomed chair, fingering the half-empty cup of coffee, his dry voice continuing the informal inquiry.

"An unfortunate affair in every respect," he said evenly, "and not unlike a hundred others of which I've heard." He stirred notes with his forefinger on the table.

Vince Carteret shaped a cigarette with bruised fingers. His mind was a maelstrom, thoughts whirling and eddying in a formless pattern in his brain. Father Gomez, with whom he had been in conference, sat directly across from him, gazing from eyes so blind now that the world was but a blur of light and shadow. But if his eyes had lost their keenness, his mind and hearing had not, and now he listened intently, fingers at his beads.

Mona Stevens poured fresh coffee. Her beauty was hard, but still beauty, and now she was completely at ease, her smile touching everybody, lingering on Vince Carteret. He shivered, sensing her thoughts, and knowing some of the urges which lay in himself.

The Commissioner cleared his throat. "Father Gomez's testimony shows that Maluni, the *Maukeena's* mate, regained his memory the night he died. He became drunk on Hull Gregson's whiskey, and while drunk bragged about the wealth Brooks carried on his yacht. Evidently, though, he misunderstood Brooks' words."

Mona Stevens sipped at her coffee. "I suppose so," she agreed.

"A curious thing, though," Father Gomez said softly, "Maluni declared he was to be the new overseer of this coconut plantation."

"What?" the girl asked startledly.

The porch door opened soundlessly, and the Commissioner's aide stepped quietly to his side.

The Commissioner nodded.

"For you, Mr. Carteret," he said, extending two envelopes.

"Thank you," Vince Carteret said, and turned the wireless messages over and over in his fingers. A second later, he placed the messages, unread, into his shirt pocket, beside a small sheet of glossy black and white paper.

The Commissioner gathered his notes. His smile ran over the small group, and a bit of the official dignity slipped away.

"That, I believe, is satisfactory for the records," he said. "Mr. Gregson and Mr. Engler met their deaths by misadventure while attempting murder for their own ends."

Mona Stevens sighed. "I'm glad it's over," she said. "I never thought anything could be so horrible."

Vince Carteret stirred. "One moment, please, Commissioner," he said, and glanced at his strap watch. "My man, Wimpy, is due at ten o'clock; and I believe he will have something more to add."

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"More?" the Commissioner said. "But my dear sir—"

"I suggest we wait," Father Gomez said simply.

"But why? Really now, I consider the case closed."

"My schooner," Vince Carteret said briefly. "Wimpy, through his native friends, has found the man who burned my boat."

Mona Stevens paused in the act of lighting her cigarette. Then she laughed softly, intimately.

"We made a bargain, Vince," she said. "I was to pay you for diving, and then to divide the profit equally."

"I remember," Vince Carteret admitted. She smiled at him, black hair glinting in the lamplight, the softness of her red lips a promise.

"I keep my bargains," she said gently, then shrugged. "It will serve no purpose to lock up some poor devil Gregson hired to burn your boat for a few dollars."

"Miss Stevens," the Commissioner said sternly, "you are asking Mr. Carteret to aid in compounding a felony in withholding information and charges."

She laughed aloud. "It was his boat," she said. "If he does not prefer charges, that is his decision. Anyway," her gaze swung to the blond trader. "Maybe he would like a partner in the trades."

Vince Carteret sighed, then crushed out his cigarette. Outside he could hear the challenging voice of Wimpy coming up the path; within seconds the man and his prisoner would be on the porch.

"*Would* you like a partner, Vince?" Mona Stevens asked.

Wimpy's knuckles tattooed on the door. The Commissioner's aid opened the door, and stood aside. Wimpy and a wizened native came through.

"This is man, sar," he said to Vince Carteret.

"Vince," Mona Stevens said gently. "Don't be foolish. You've *nothing* to gain by harassing this native."

"Maybe," Vince Carteret said thinly.

HE SLIPPED the envelopes from his pocket and deliberately opened them. After reading, he handed them to her and watched bleakly as she read. The Commissioner frowned, watching. Father Gomez stared blindly, head cocked a bit as though his hearing would tell him what was happening. Mona Stevens read and then looked up. She was smiling, but there was a thin line of whiteness about her mouth.

"Interesting," she said.

"What is it?" the Commissioner asked.

The papers crumpled in Mona Stevens' fingers. "Partners, all the way, Vince!" she said—it sounded like a challenge.

Vince Carteret grinned wryly. "Tell it, Wimpy," he said shortly.

Wimpy tightened his grip on the native's arm, and the native's voice squealed in sudden pain.

"I burn schooner," he cried. "She give me fifty Straits dollars."

"What!" The Commissioner was bending forward.

"He lies!" Mona Stevens said sharply.

Vince Carteret shook his head, then bent forward and adroitly retrieved the wireless messages.

"No, he doesn't lie," he said. He held up the messages, reading. "'Chaim Stevens died January Twelfth, last, of coronary thrombosis, in Veterans' Hospital. Records show no kin, daughter, Mona Stevens, dying Melbourne October Fourteenth, of blackwater fever. Signed, J. H. Townsend, Chief Inspector.'"

"But she's Mona Stevens!" the Commissioner said startledly. "There has been some mistake!"

Vince Carteret glanced from the second message to the girl. She was rigid, hands gripping the arms of her chair, shivering as though with ague.

"'Girl's description fits that of Chaim Stevens' nurse during last illness. Girl is Janeth Greer, has police record. Complete identification impossible without Bertillon and fingerprints. Signed, James Cutler, Superintendent of Police.'"

"Let me see those," the Commissioner snapped.

Vince Carteret handed the messages to the other, then laid the snapshot on the table before the girl. She stared at it blindly.

"I didn't understand until yesterday," he said bleakly. "As a child you were blonde; now you are black-haired." His mouth thinned. "I don't know what the scheme

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was," he finished. "But I know there was no diving for pearls."

She laughed. She laughed, and the bitterness of defeat lay in her voice.

"You fool!" she said.

"You wanted me to dive for you," Vince Carteret said. "You and Gregson were after something on that yacht. You hired this native to burn my boat, knowing it would break me and that I'd be open to any proposition."

"This is incredible!" the Commissioner said.

Father Gomez bent forward. "My dear young lady," he said, "in talking with me, you knew too much and too little. You recalled little details and forgot big affairs. But being almost blind I could not look at you and discover you were fraudulent. It was only after Mr. Carteret came to me and we talked that our suspicions crystallized."

The girl sighed. "All right," she said, "I'm Janeth Greer. I was Stevens' nurse. He told me of Mona, of her life and his, and he had her identity papers. When he died, there were no heirs, and so I decided to become Mona Stevens."

VINCE CARTERET nodded, fumbling for a cigarette. He could not take his gaze from the girl, and the pain in him was almost physical.

"Stevens had sold the plantation to Brooks," she said, "but Brooks had died in his sunken yacht. Through Stevens' talk, I discovered Brooks had no heirs. No one knew Stevens had sold, except Brooks and Stevens and myself—or so I thought.

"I came to the island, passing myself as Mona Stevens. My only worry was Father Gomez, and then I found he was too blind to discredit me. I found Gregson running the plantation and pocketing the money." She lit a fresh cigarette, hands trembling. "Gregson accepted me as Mona Stevens. Then Maluni regained his memory, and Gregson realized the property belonged to Brooks. He also discovered the deed lay in a locked box in the *Maukeena*, a hundred feet down.

"He wanted that deed, for Brooks had owed him money; and once he proved Brooks was dead, without heirs, he could take over the plantation for the amount of the debt owed him by Brooks in several trading deals.

"He hired Gratt away from me, planning to dive for the deed. Then when you came to the island, he tried to hire you. I listened and heard your talk, and so I burned your boat, knowing you would think he had ordered it done. My plan worked, and you decided to dive for me."

Vince Carteret crushed out his cigarette. "This is crazy," he said.

The girl shook her head. "I wanted to destroy the paper. Gregson wanted it to produce in court. This plantation can be worth a fortune in the next few years." She shrugged. "You know the rest of it."

"Miss er—Greer," the Commissioner said heavily, "you are, of course, in custody. Charges will be made later."

Vince Carteret came slowly to his feet. Somehow, now that it was over, there was no sense of triumph in him. The girl looked up at his towering figure, and bitterness came to her voice.

"Do you know what it's like to be poor?" she asked harshly. "Never a penny more than is necessary to live, never good clothes! I'd have done more than burn a boat to gain this plantation."

"Yes, I guess you would," Vince Carteret agreed.

And then he was gone from the porch, striding full-weighted along the path which led to the town. A void lay in his mind, and suddenly the night was ugly and friendless.

He was remembering words Gregson had said about Mona Stevens and her nursing ability. He was remembering a snapshot of a rangy little girl—blonde-headed and alert. He was recalling how a girl had appealed to him to help her, and the manner in which he had responded. The memory of his escape through the Singing Cliff haunted him. And through his memories wandered the shades of Hull Gregson and Gratt Engler, both dead now, because of their greed and a girl's treachery. He was suddenly tired and irritable, and he wanted only a drink at Torangi's friendly bar.

He heard the running steps behind, but did not turn. A man came to his side and slowed his pace, and they walked together down the shell path. Once, Vince Carteret turned to stare back at the Stevens house,

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and his hands clenched in regret at what might have been. Then he turned and went ahead, face stony and eyes unyielding.

"Sar?" Wimpy said breathlessly.

"Shut up, Mister," Vince Carteret said, and went ahead.

THE morning sun painted streaks of yellow and orange and vermilion across the water of the bay. Vince Carteret watched it blindly from the rail of the schooner, *Nahuaokoai,* barely listening to Torangi's words.

The big Polynesian was beaming, his eyes friendly, his voice warm and confidential.

"She's not biggest schooner, but she sound," he said. "You take her out and trade with it. I give you tick, and you pay back out of earnings. Later, maybe I fix so you buy for self."

"Thanks, Torangi," Vince Carteret said absently, watching the great white house on the Stevens' plantation. Smoke drifted lazily from the chimney, but no one moved about outside. The Commissioner would have left someone in charge until ownership was established.

He heard Wimpy ordering the Kanakas about, and a grin stirred about his mouth at the authority in the other's voice. The crew was making ready to sail on flood tide; within short minutes sails would lift and the schooner would stand out to sea.

"Well, goodbye, Tuan Vince," Torangi said at last. Hope to see you in three-four months."

"So long—and thanks," Carteret said, and helped the man over the side, onto the ladder which led to the outrigger.

He watched the oarsman pull away from the schooner, waving automatically, then turned back to the deck.

"Up sails," he called. "We're going out."

Sails ran up, the Kanakas pulling at long ropes and capstan bars. The schooner began to lift her keel, running a bit, gathering speed, foam purling beneath her bow.

"Shipshape, sar," Wimpy said, grinning. "Small boat, but she do 'til we get better."

"Fine, Mister," Vince Carteret answered and leaned against the rail again, brooding over the side.

The schooner crept past the Singing Cliffs, hearing their siren cry. He saw the Commissioner's boat swing into the open seas, Diesels thrusting it into flight. For one ageless moment he saw the girl on deck. Her arm lifted and waved; and then the yacht was turning and racing away.

Behind, the Singing Cliffs sang in a myriad voice, and at the wheel Wimpy discreetly watched the sails and wondered when once again he would taste hamburgers.

"Up two points, Mister," Vince Carteret bellowed across the deck.

The schooner caught the wind and began to run.

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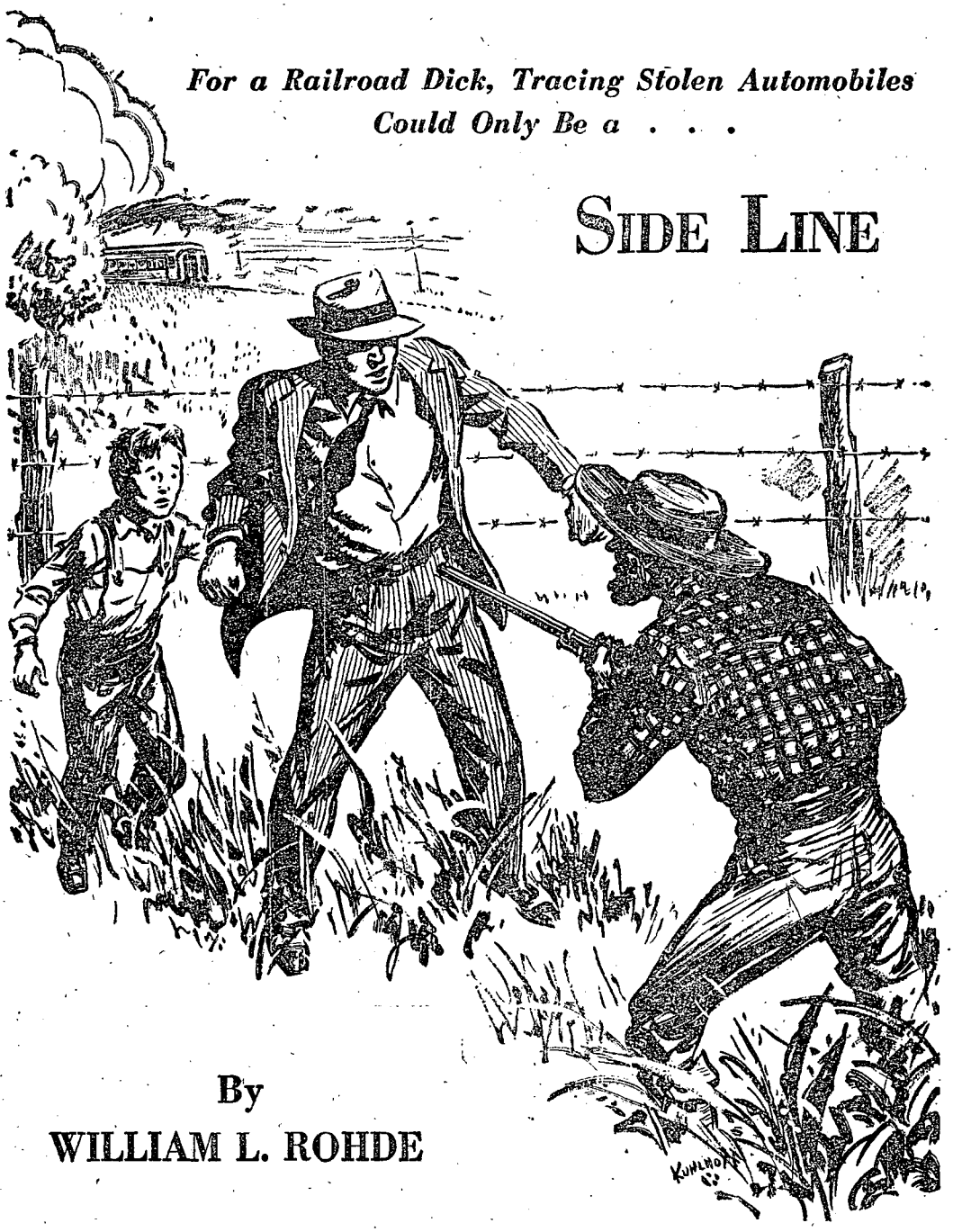
For a Railroad Dick, Tracing Stolen Automobiles Could Only Be a . . .

SIDE LINE



By

WILLIAM L. ROHDE

THE man who came out of the trees could have posed for an action shot of the Civil War. Black beard and grimy, wide-brimmed hat, blue shirt and jeans and a pair of battered boots with plenty of the cow stable clinging to them—he might have been one of Quantrell's men after a tough week in a swamp. Mohawk Daniels stood very still as the man crossed the bit of sun-browned meadow and confronted him, because the double-barreled shotgun was trained steadily on Daniels' belly.

"What de ye want?"

The question twanged from tight lips that

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opened sparingly over each word. Daniels tried to look as pleasant as possible. The farmer had hard corners to his eyes and mouth—the kind of a man who wouldn't point a gun at you unless he was willing to kill you.

"Just looking the ground over," Daniels said, "I'm a railroad policeman."

The hard eyes narrowed dangerously and Mo hurried on. "Some kid threw a stone at Number 22 last week from right here. Have you seen any youngsters around?"

The muzzle of the shotgun swung downward, although slowly, and the man's heavy boots trampled a step or two past Daniels. He peered down over the shoulder of earth that led to the Atlantic and Northern Railroad's single track branch.

"How'd ye know the kid was here?"

"Conductor spotted him. There's a milepost just around the curve. The conductor described this spot."

The shotgun was lowered butt first to the ground, very gently, and the farmer looked sourly at the strip of barbed wire that separated the hilly meadow from the railroad right-of-way.

"I LOST some cows last month," he said shortly, with the same hard truculence in his tones, "though you mighta bin one of them fellers lookin' fer more."

Mo nodded just as if he believed the story. "Don't blame you," he made it very sincere, "a man can't afford to have his stock trucked away for beef. I've heard about that sort of thing. Now how about that youngster? Did you see anything of him?"

"It wuz the Carroll kid. Fust house down the road."

Without another word or a gesture of good-bye the man strode back towards the thin lines of trees, and a moment later disappeared from view over the rise. His course would take him to the cluster of unpainted barns and a dreary-looking house that Daniels had seen as he drove by.

"The same to you," Mo muttered, and went down the bank, across the cinder-ballasted tracks to his car, parked off the narrow dirt road. The sun had warmed the seat of the convertible, and Daniels appreciated the breeze as he drove towards "the fust house down the road." It was a nice day all around—he felt quite kindly towards humanity.

THE house was small and tilted a bit with age, but brightened with new paint on shutters and doors, and surrounded with clusters of bushes evidently gleaned from the woods. Three huge maple trees dominated the lawn, and from one of them hung a swing. The small boy sitting in the swing regarded Daniels with uneasy suspicion.

The railroad officer kept his face serious as he sauntered toward the youngster, although the bright brown eyes and alert, slightly pugnacious air of the boy made him want to grin.

"Hello, Bub."

"Hello."

"Your name Carroll?"

"Yes."

"Got any brothers?"

Very slowly—"No."

"Then you're the boy who threw the stone and hit the train last Tuesday—"

Very, very slowly, with head turning down "—Yes."

The door of the house opened and a woman of about thirty came into the yard. She was worn, with the thin, tired look that comes from hard work at small reward. But she was politely pleasant, and said hello with a question in her voice.

"Hello," Mo said, "my name is Mohawk Daniels. I'm a railroad officer for the Atlantic and Northern. Your boy threw a stone that broke a window in one of our trains."

The tired eyes widened. "Donny! Why did you? Just wait until your father gets home."

The small head went down until only tousled brown hair could be seen.

Mo looked at the woman and very slowly winked one eye. "Anyway," he said, "Donny didn't lie about it when I asked him. That's usually a sign of a pretty good boy. Has he ever stoned anything before?"

Relief replaced a little of the worry in the woman's face. "No—that is, not cars or trains. His father is away a good deal, working on a tree gang. Sometimes I think I don't know how to handle a boy."

"I guess my mother said the same thing. Perhaps if you'll let us men take a ride up to the railroad and talk this over, I can

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convince Donny why he shouldn't throw stones."

The woman looked closely at Daniel's face. She saw a brown, rugged jaw that was softened by the hint of a grin. She smiled.

"I hope you can. Or else, tell me what to do with him."

"I think I can explain it."

The woman turned and went back to the house. Daniels sat on a wooden bench near the swing.

"How old are you, Don?"

"Eight."

"Why did you throw that stone?"

"Don't know."

"What were you doing up on that hill, anyway?"

"Went up to Mr. Wacker's to see his car. He chased me back that way."

"Is Mr. Wacker the big man in boots—carries a shotgun?"

"Yes."

DANIELS could imagine the boy running away from the Wacker farm with the big bearded man shouting threats at him. Perhaps Donny had picked up a stone as a Lilliputian defense. Then the boy was near the tracks. He was angry at men. The train roared by, symbol of power and things that chased you. There were men on the train. He threw his stone.

Daniels sighed, wishing he had read that book on psychology a bit more carefully. "Donny," he said, "you'll get in trouble if you go around throwing stones. Anyway, you wouldn't want to hurt the people on the train, or anyone else. Why, if you waved at the engineer, he'd be a friend of yours."

The bright brown eyes looked up at that. "Why?" Donny demanded.

"Just because—all people are friendly if you treat 'em right. Don't you ever wave at the trains?"

"Nope."

"Well, I think if you went down the road and waved at the train crews, they'd see you. Might even toot the whistle after they saw you a few times. Of course, you mustn't go on the tracks. That's dangerous and against the law."

"How do you know he'd wave?" Donny was hanging on to the idea.

"They will if they see you, most every time Let's go down and try it."

They drove back up the road, Donny sitting straight up on the edge of the seat. Daniels thought he could probably describe the convertible's dashboard without missing a detail, for the youngster studied it eagerly.

"What's the black knob?" the boy asked.

"This one?"

"Yes."

"Overdrive—an extra gear step."

Daniels grinned to himself as they got out of the car at the A. & N. right-of-way. Donny evidently knew his automobiles. Mo glanced at his watch. Number 19 was three minutes overdue. A moment later the sound of her whistle echoed through the hills—two long blasts and two short—she must be leaving Pinetown and whistling for the crossing.

They stood by the wire fence and waited. Through a dip in the hills Daniels could see the Wacker farm. A small figure came out of the unpainted house and seemed to be looking at them.

The sound of Number 19's Ten-wheeler rasped through the cut, and then the black nose of the engine came into view. She was tossing a feather of steam and picking up speed for the straightaway.

"Wave, Donny," Daniels said, and watched the boy climb two steps up the box-wire fence and wave his hand above his head. Mo touched a match to his cigar. He would not wave himself—he didn't want Johnny Knapp to think he was getting a warning.

Number 19 swept towards them with a solid beat to her exhausts, a sound sturdy enough to match the rhythm of hoarse kettledrums. Johnny Knapp had his head out of the Ten-Wheeler's cab, his left hand out of view on the bar, right hand on the cab window-sill.

"Hie-e-e," Donny yelled.

The engineer certainly did not hear that squeak above the pounding vibration of his iron mount, but he saw the small boy waving and his right arm swept up in reply. That wide, friendly greeting that engineers give their admirers from the Bangor and Aroostook to The San Diego and Arizona Eastern. White teeth flashed in a grin beneath black-framed goggles. Donny nearly fell off the fence with excitement—and Number 19 whipped her combine and three coaches past them.

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"Wave to the brakeman," Daniels said.

Donny fanned the air again and was rewarded with a flash of white from between the rear vestibule doors.

The boy climbed down from the fence and displayed a smile that seemed to reach for his ears. "Did yuh see 'em!" he demanded. "They all waved. They saw me."

"Sure. That's nothing. Almost every trainman will wave to you. Then you're friends. Some day they might even throw you a magazine. Then if your Dad takes you down to Pinetown station some Saturday, you can meet 'em. Shake hands with the engineer when he's oiling up the engine. Why—you never know what your friends will do for you, if they like you. But—throwing stones at people; well——"

"Gee," the boy said, "I wish I didn't. What if I'd hit the engineer?"

The small shoulders slumped and Donny Carroll looked as mournful as a Wall Street banker holding a barrel of commons when the bottom fell out.

"It's over and done with," Daniels said, "from now on you can be friends. And it's better that way—man to man. Did you ever see a man throw a stone at another's back."

"No," whispered Donny.

"O.K., Don," Daniels laughed and rumpled the brown hair which already looked like a chewed broom, "you'll get along."

Donny looked up—smiled—and then gasped and ran around the car. "Look out," he squeaked, in a voice choked by fear, "it's Walt Wacker."

Daniels whirled to confront the man who had come quickly and quietly up the road. It was dirty boots and shotgun again.

"Whaddya doin' now," the hard voice growled, "still snoopin'? You wanna see if this gun shoots?"

"Now wait a minute," Daniels said as coolly as he could, "this is a public road."

The shotgun was a foot from his chest. "Cow stealers," its owner rasped, "I got a good mind to whup you."

Daniels thought of his Police Positive resting in the glove compartment. Who'd have thought it would be handy on a stone throwing check-up?

"Relax," Daniels said, but there was a hard note to his tone and his black eyes snapped a little, "you're too touchy for your own good."

"Git outa here." The shotgun poked Mo in the chest.

That was a mistake. Mo's right hand slashed across and thrust the black barrel down and out, carrying the muzzle below his heart—just in case.

Blam! Reflex or the jerk of the butt brought Wacker's finger down on the trigger. The 12-gauge bucked and a charge of shot spattered the grass and the railroad right-of-way, some of the pellets clanking as they hit the rails.

Daniels grabbed the barrel with both hands, kicked his foot into the other man's belly, and heaved. The two big men flew apart—but the shotgun came with Daniels.

"Damn yuh," the big bearded man regained his balance and lurched forward. Daniels threw the gun far into the field at his right and stepped forward himself.

Walt Wacker evidently had been around. He held his anger and came on with his burly, hair-padded arms up—not quite in a boxer's style, but rather like a mountain wrestler, ready to strike or grip.

Daniels half-stepped right, balanced, and shot out his left. It was no jab—it was a punch meant to go home and it did, with Daniels, two-hundred odd pounds behind it. The fist smashed through the black beard, but its owner was going away and rolled with the punch. Daniels followed through with a right to the heart that rocked Wacker and then they were slugging it out in the middle of the road.

The railroad detective placed his first three or four punches—a left hook that bobbed Wacker's skull five inches to the right—a driving right that got through but pounded a rock-like breastbone instead of a chin, and another short left that missed.

A right returned to connect with Daniels' forehead and the bridge of his nose like the kick of a mule, and another came inside his left to batter his ribs.

The fight became a slugging match. Toe to toe in the dusty road the two panting, sweating men swapped punches that would have finished lighter, less rugged battlers.

Daniels felt himself slowing up—but he knew Wacker was doing no better. He gulped a breath, sending orders to his brain that would keep him going if his head fogged more than it had.

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Slug!—with a left. Slug!—with a right. Slug!—high. Slug!—low. Slug!—again.

The day was getting hazy. His mouth was full of blood and saliva. His lungs were gasping for air. He took a step forward to keep himself from ever taking one back.

Wacker broke first. His left weakened, he threw a low right and stepped back—one step—two steps.

Daniels saw the old signals—knew he had enough left—and went forward. A left and a right—and one more right, place this one—on the jaw.

Wacker tried to raise his left to block the punch, but the arm seemed strangely heavy, moved in slow motion. Daniels smashed home the right and felt it all the way to the base of his spine. Wacker took a small step back, seemed to catch the road with his heels, and crashed down on his back. He lay still, twitching his hands slightly like a turtle that has been crushed with a rock.

DANIELS staggered to the car and held onto the door for a moment, breathing heavily. Then he slowly pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face. He spat blood and felt of his teeth. They seemed to be all right. There were some cuts on his lips he could feel with his tongue—that was where the blood came from—they'd probably swell up like balloons.

"Y'all right?"

Daniels turned and looked for the voice. In the field, with the shotgun resting on a fallen tree and pointed towards Walt Wacker, sat Donny Carroll. His excited face was taut and scared, but his hand was on the trigger of the shotgun.

"Hey," Daniels said, "bring that here. Careful, now."

The boy brought the gun to him. "I pumped another shell in," he said, "she's a trombone, ain't she?"

"Yea," Daniels told him, "that's what they call 'em. What were you gonna do?"

"I dunno. I was afraid of hittin' you."

"Guess you had the right idea, anyway."

He emptied the gun, threw it back in the field, and dragged Walt Wacker off the road. The big man was moaning and mouthing. Some of the things were not for little boys to hear.

"C'mon, Donny. I'll drop you at home."

Ten minutes later Daniels was washing the dirt and blood off himself in the ticket office of the Pinetown station. He had the lumps, he reflected, but also a job had been done. Donny Carroll probably would never throw stones at a train again—and the less people a railroad prosecuted, the more friends it could keep. That was one reason he didn't bother to bring Walt Wacker in charged with assault. Daniels figured the railroad paid him to do its work—and if that meant giving and taking a beating at times, it was included in the pay check.

He wiped his face and hands on the agent's towel, put his shirt on, and sat down and lit a cigar.

"Who'd you tangle with, Mo?"

Sheraton, the elderly agent, had kept quiet until Daniels had repaired his damage.

"Some guy named Walt Wacker, up on the northbound about two miles."

"Yea! Say, he's a good shipper."

Daniels grinned to himself—a good thing he hadn't lost his head and dragged the farmer in for Chuck Blare to book!

"Don't ever mention it, Sheraton, we'll just forget it."

He thought of the Wacker farm, drab and poor-looking. "Say, what does Wacker ship?"

"Hay. He buys a lot and ships it south. Two or three fifty-foot cars a week."

"I thought fifty-foot cars were scarce."

"They are, but he won't take no others, so I get 'em to get the business. He's got a siding just north of his place. Used to be a coal siding."

"He doesn't look like much of a business man."

"Makes money, though. Pays top tariff every time to rush his cars through without weighing."

Daniels was still wondering how a farmer who looked like a backwoods bandit could be such a business success when Chuck Blare came into the station office.

Blare was a bit older than Daniels, in his early forties, and wore the neat blue uniform of a New England small town cop. He had a pleasant face—and the air of a man who tries to take it easy, but won't stand for much defiance. A worn grip on the S. & W. Special showed that he didn't let his hand get rusty, and the holster, black belt, and cuff-case were clean and polished.

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"Hello, Mo," he greeted the railroad officer, "what's up?"

"Nothing much," Daniels told him. "Found young Donny Carroll was the bad boy with the stones. Had a talk with him. I don't think he'll try it again."

Blare nodded. "I see. We'll keep an eye on him. Glad you settled it quietly—they're nice folks. Who split your lip for you?"

"One of your valued citizens — Walt Wacker. Let that go, too. He got frisky with that shotgun. I left him laying beside the road."

Blare laughed. "I'd like to have seen that. You two gorillas oughta be able to put on a good scrap."

"We did."

Above the cricketing of the station telegraph came the sound of a harsh voice. It bounced through the open window of the station and Blare leaped to answer it—it was the speaker in the village cruiser, tuned to the State Police radio net.

"—cars 42, 9, and 24P take position C.—"

Daniels followed the town officer out and lounged against the side of the new Plymouth while Blare acknowledged the repeated message.

"What's up?" Daniels asked.

"Another stolen car. '48 Packard sedan. Blue one. I'm car 24P, and position C for me is right here, watching the highway north."

"Yea?" Daniels whistled. "Big time stuff, eh?"

"Damn big. In the last six months over 50 cars have been stolen in Massachusetts and Vermont. Two weeks ago a doctor was run over and killed by two men who stole his Buick. His wife gave the alarm five minutes later when another car came by, but that Buick and the men just vanished, like the others."

Daniels went over to his V-8, took the .38 Police Positive out of the dash compartment and stuck it in his pocket. Chucky Blare watched him and laughed. "Attaboy. Now just hope they come this way, but they never have yet."

Mo gazed down the black macadam, a two-lane ribbon that made a tree-shaded loop around the freight house, and then disappeared over a hill towards Pinetown's business district.

"Chuck," Daniels said reflectively, "these New England hills are a honeycomb of dirt roads and almost abandoned lanes. You haven't got 'em all covered, have you?"

"Nope, although State boys get into most of 'em once in a while."

"Then these birds can run right around you if they're smart."

"That's been figured. But we know that no gang is smart enough to drive a lot of cars all the way out of New England on dirt roads. And we've used seven-state alerts on these cars—and haven't caught a thing."

Daniels lounged against the car and puffed on his cigar. He didn't want to hurt Chuck's feelings, but he thought that he could drive a car out of New England if he had to on roads that would be 90 per cent safe. All you had to do was get the government survey maps and plot your course carefully, with some previous knowledge of the terrain. You'd make use of old stage roads, cow paths, and county roads that the main highways had made almost useless, but you'd get through.

"Hey," Chucky's hail brought him out of his trance, "you got the case all figured out? Gonna take on that stolen car as a side line? It'd make a good day's work for you."

Mo laughed and walked over to the shade of the passenger platform where Blare lounged on a bench.

"Nope. No side lines for me. I have enough trouble doing a job for the A. & N."

A car whined over the hill from Pinetown and raced around the curve past the freight house. It was a blue sedan.

"C'mon," Chuck shouted, "there it is."

They ran to the road, but the car slowed down when Chuck put up his left hand, and braked to a stop. It was a blue Dodge. The town cop waved them on.

"Mr. and Mrs. Fennebresque" he snorted, "false alarm."

"Don't you make a roadblock?" Daniels asked.

"And get that new Plymouth rammed? Don't worry, if they come through I'll stop 'em."

Daniels figured that as top man on the county pistol team, Chuck Blare probably would. But there was something about this problem that bothered him. Something that churned around in his mind and demanded attention, as though he had a piece of a

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puzzle and didn't fill his obligation to put it into place.

"I'm going back to Fitchburg," Daniels said suddenly, "I'll be keeping my eyes open, Chuck."

"Good luck. Drop in some night and we'll have some cool ones."

"It's a deal."

Daniels eased the V-8 up the road from Pinetown north, following the macadam to where the dirt lane turned off sharply toward the Carroll place. He drove slowly toward the small house and stopped when Donny Carroll waved to him and ran down the path. His mother followed him, and they stood beside the Ford.

"Hello, Mr. Daniels," Mrs. Carroll smiled as she spoke—it erased some of the tired lines but couldn't fill in the thin-fleshed cheeks—"Donny tells me that you showed him how to make friends with the train crews. He's really sorry about that stone."

"I know he is," Daniels answered, "tell his father that I said he's all right and doesn't need the woodshed treatment."

The railroad detective looked at the boy's shining face. The brown hair was combed this time — Donny was a good-looking youngster. "Donny," Mo said suddenly, "you told me something today that I ought to remember. But I can't think what it was."

The boy looked puzzled. He knitted his small brows. "Gee, I don't know. Gee—" He was looking at the dash of the V-8 again. "Say," he asked suddenly, "why have you got two radios?"

"One is just a receiver for the police band," Daniels told him gravely, "I had to get a permit for it. You can do the same thing by putting the right coils in the regular radio, but I thought I'd rather have a separate receiver."

"Gee," the boy marveled, looking at the dials on the dash.

Something clicked in Daniels' mind. "Donny," he asked, "why did you tell me that you went up to Wacker's?"

"To see his car," the boy said promptly, "he has a swell one."

"What kind?"

"A Mercury, I think. It looks like the pictures in the magazine."

"Why didn't you just wait until he drove by?"

"He don't. I saw it drive in one morning, early, but now he don't take it out of the garage."

"Thanks," Daniels said, pressing the starter button, "next time up this way I'll take you for a ride, Donny. Bye Mrs. Carroll."

He gunned the V-8 up the dirt road past the Wacker farm. The road wound through the woods and then back along the A. & N.'s right-of-way. Then he saw what he was looking for.

Almost hidden by the rich foliage and second-growth timber, a siding led off from the branch line, and a faint road turned off and followed it. Daniels got out of his car and walked over to the tracks.

The ground was black with spilled coal, pierced here and there by weeds that were starting to conceal the stains on the earth. No coal had been delivered here for some time, evidently, but on the short spur stood a Santa Fe fifty-foot automobile car.

Daniels walked over to the car and looked in. It was clean, empty, and without auto racks. He glanced at the lane. Some cars had evidently driven to the siding recently, or perhaps trucks loading hay or other produce.

He stood there in the quiet wood, listening to the song of some tuneful bird that insisted on trying to out-trill the mocking bird who echoed him. He remembered what he had said about not liking side lines, shrugged his shoulders, and went back to his Ford.

The smooth sound of an automobile engine purred through the forest just before Daniels started his own motor. It came from somewhere behind him. He turned the V-8 and drove back towards the Wacker place.

The farmyard was empty and quiet when Daniels stopped his convertible in the yard. Perhaps too empty and too quiet—he backed his car around in a short arc, and left it headed out from beside the barn before he cut the engine.

A Rhode Island Red clucked with annoyance and cocked its head at Daniels from under a corncrib.

"Scram, Communist," Mo said, and the hen stalked disdainfully away.

DANIELS walked over to the small door at the side of the barn. The stillness began to annoy him. Two small lights of glass were smeared or painted from the in-

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side. He pushed on the door. It opened to his touch. He stepped into the gloom.

"All right, snooper. Stand still!"

Daniels froze, glancing to the right only with his eyes. Walt Wacker arose from behind a pile of grain bags and came forward, the shotgun held steady and low.

"Search him, Mort," Wacker snapped.

Daniels felt hands come from behind him. The Police Positive was jerked from his pocket. He was glad he hadn't tried to draw it. The odds were getting tight.

His eyes were getting accustomed to the gloom. In the darkness that slowly retreated he saw the blue Packard, standing in the middle of the wooden floor, where it had passed through the big door. On the far side of the big room, beneath the lofts of hay, were two more cars,

The Packard, which must have been the car he heard while in the woods near the railroad siding, should have carried two men. That meant there was another man somewhere besides Mort.

"Git over in the middle of the floor," Wacker snarled. He jabbed with the shotgun muzzle like a soldier lunging at a dummy with a bayonet. Daniels moved quickly away.

"Hold it, Walt," the man called Mort said, "we gotta figure this thing out. Who's this guy?"

"Snoopin' railroad dick."

Wacker touched a wall switch and lights came on in the barn. Daniels decided that Mort was the brains of the pair—he was well-dressed, with an ugly look of purpose and the sharp eyes of a weasel.

"Does this mean the game is up?" Mort asked Wacker.

"I don't think so. This snooper was alone."

The weasel eyes fastened on Daniels. There was no emotion in them—just cold purpose, and the purpose was death.

"One thing to do then." Mort held Daniels' .38 in his right hand. He brought it up cooly, in a business-like way. He was six feet from Daniels and the gun centered on his heart. Daniels tensed himself to spring, although he knew it was the finish. You can't beat a .38 and a shotgun.

"Mr. Daniels! Mr. Daniels!" the voice, thin and shrill, came from outside the barn.

"Who's that?" Mort rasped without taking his eyes or the gun off Daniels.

"Thet damn Donny Carroll," Wacker grunted. "I'll fix him."

He opened the door and ran out, swearing. Mort watched Daniels with cold, steady eyes.

MO DROPPED his glance to the floor of the barn. He let his hands tremble—which wasn't too much of an effort.

"C'n I smoke—" he asked in a shaky voice.

Mort liked it. "Go ahead," he said, "and go ahead and try somethin', if you want to."

The gun was steadily held, efficiently aimed. Daniels got out a Raleigh and lit a match with trembling hands. He pretended to miss the light and shook it out. It was evident that Mort belonged in the city—he didn't know much about hay barns.

"Ma! Ma!" The shouts came from somewhere in back of the barn. "Ma! Ma!" They could be heard moving around the building and then seemed to go away. The sound of Wacker's muffled cursing followed the same route.

Mort took several steps backward and glanced at the barn door. Daniels lit his cigarette, ignited the packet of matches, and dropped butt, match, and fiercely glowing cluster into the piles of dry hay at his feet.

"Hey, Mort," he shouted, "get some water! We'll be burned!"

He went down on his knees and pretended to beat at the flames, which leaped to the side of the barn and were following the carelessly stacked hay which had been pulled from the lofts above.

"Wacker," Mort yelled, "hey, Walt. C'm 'ere."

Daniels appeared to work furiously. He found a pitchfork and thrust at the blazing mass which was mushrooming with flame and smoke. "Help, Mort," he yelled, "we gotta stop this."

It couldn't last. Mort stood near the front of the Packard and thought it over. He came to the right decision. As Daniels stepped away from the wall and loft, which were now a mass of fire, he shot Daniels, just before the pitchforkful of burning hay descended on his head. Mort screamed and fired once more, before Daniels lunged at him with the pitchfork. Mort went down in

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a heap, squeaking plaintively as the fire bit at his face and neck. Daniels scooped the .38 toward himself with the tines of the fork.

He retrieved the gun, stuck it in his pocket, and dragged Mort to the small door. He contemplated leaving him to burn, as he felt the blood dampen his side where he had been hit. He didn't know how bad it would be—you might be dying and not know it—but he'd play it out.

He opened the small door of the barn and stepped out, to see Walt Wacker coming toward the building, dragging a squirming Donny Carroll by the arm. Daniels drew the .38 and set Wacker's chest neatly in the V and bead.

Wacker did his best. He fired the shotgun once, one-handed, before he went down.

From the front of the farm came the roar of Daniels' V-8. It lurched around the barn and gunned for the driveway, driven evidently by the third man, who must have been in the farmhouse while the excitement built up.

Mo hated to do it. You never knew if the State or the railroad would pay for damages—but—he spotted the V and bead again on the shoulders looming barely above the convertible's body as it roared past and away.

"One!"—the car kept going. "Two!"—the V-8 twisted into the driveway drainage ditch at forty miles an hour and Daniels groaned as he saw the front end buckle on the stone-lined trough.

He went down to the car and looked at the man. He was swearing and moaning with a hole through his right shoulder, just below the collarbone. Daniels took a Colt .45 away from him and went back to finish dragging Mort out of the flaming barn.

Chuck Blare drove Daniels down to the doctor's office after a State cruiser gathered up the prisoners. The general practitioner with a clean white mustache knew his stuff. He put a compress on Daniels' side, shook his head, and poured three shots of good brandy into water glasses.

"Bracer," he smacked his lips appreciatively, "best thing for you. Lucky you did not get that slug through an intestine, young man."

Blare sat in the doctor's big leaather chair and smelled the liquor in his glass. "Mo," he said, "before you write up the report for the Staties—clear it up for me. How come?"

"Luck," Daniels said. "We'll check with Sheraton, the station agent, on where those carloads of Wacker's were sent to. Of course, he loaded two autos in each one, and filled in the space near the boxcar door with hay. Sheraton put the seals on and that was that.

"We'll find that they went to some small station down south, and then may have even been rerouted to Cuba, Mexico, the West Coast, or anywhere. A slick deal."

Chuck nodded. "Some stuff. We better get on it. The Federals will want to start tracing those cars in a hurry. May clean up the other end."

"Yea," Daniels said, without much enthusiasm.

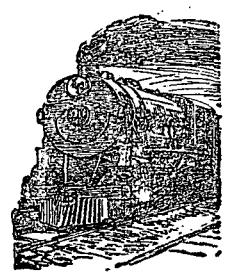
"What's the matter? You wondering how they loaded those cars? That's easy. I found the 2x6 plank ramps leaning right against Wacker's corncrib."

"I saw those," Daniels said. "It isn't that. Who's gonna pay for fixin' my new Ford? These side lines can be damned expensive."

Blare laughed. "Between the insurance companies, the railroad, the State, and the owners of those cars, you'll make out all right."

"I hope so."

And he did.



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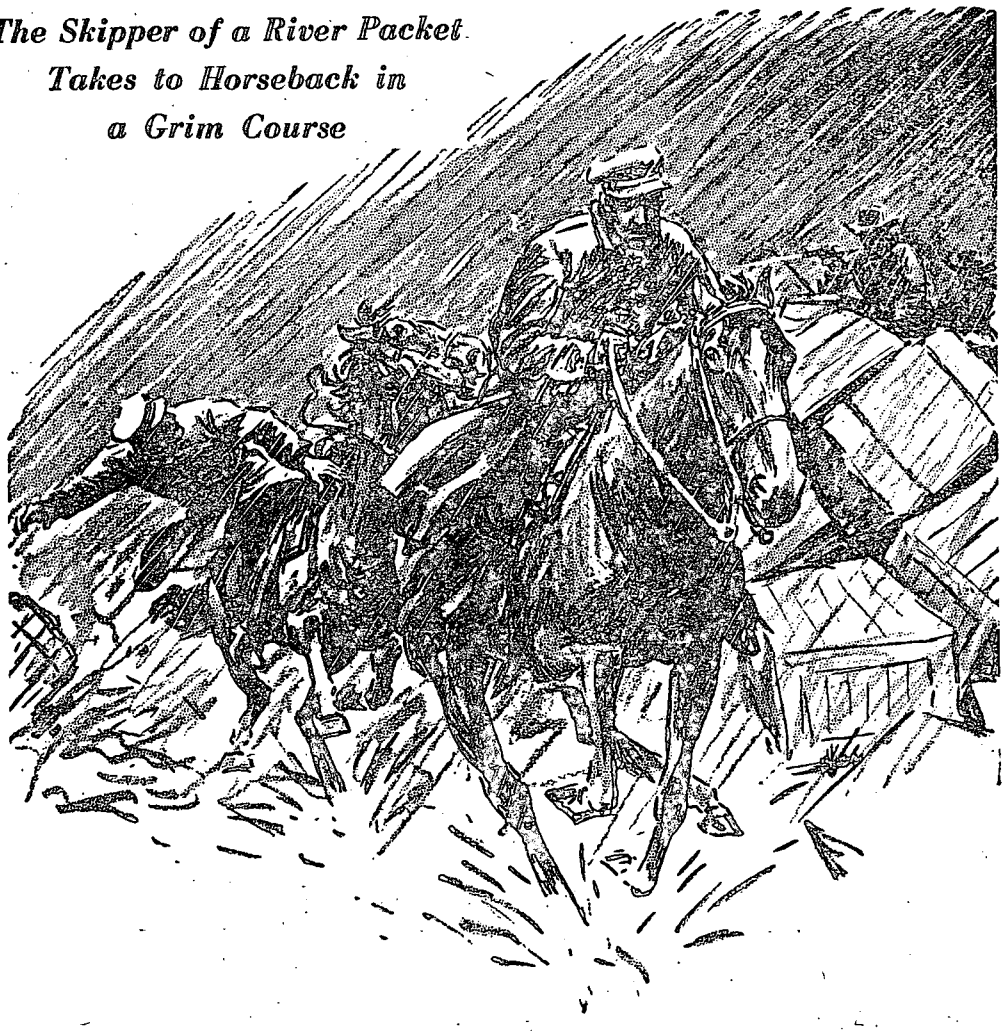
The Skipper of a River Packet Takes to Horseback in a Grim Course



BONANZA GLUT

By GIFF CHESHIRE

I

THE two packet officers looked strange astride horses atop the dark and storm-drenched headland, and Sam Arundel was feeling the part. His blue master's cap did nothing to interrupt the steady rain trickling down his neck. Long legs and wide, raw-boned wrists and hands were soaked and chafing. His horse could not be hurried beyond a jogging walk, its tail swept between its legs by the high wind.

Sam could barely see the open sweep about him. Head bent, he kept his gaze canted out past wet, beaded eyebrows, glued to the puddled ruts of this stretch of the twelve mile portage. Freight was piled high on either side at this particular mire, as at scores of others where portage teamsters had bogged and cheerfully jettisoned to a point where they could slog on the Deschutes Landing above the river break.

Much of it had remained where unloaded and was now ruined by winter weather. Sam was concerned over the fact that a great deal of it was company freight brought in to Dalles City by his own packet, which had

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cost a young fortune in the way of claims. Pressure of stampeder business never gave the portage freighters a chance to pick up dumped freight before it was ruined and rendered useless by rough weather, so Morg Owen insisted. When he did get to it, much of the stuff had simply vanished, said Owen, who was the company contract hauler. The man's attitude, Sam reflected sourly, was that of most of the rest. What difference did it make when they were swamped with gold rush business to the countless hinterland mining camps and had set their tariffs accordingly.

Riding a length ahead of Sam, Nick Cameron, the purser, twisted in the saddle. "Looks like the heaving shivers is all this bright caper's going to catch us," he called. "Why don't you get off and carry that blasted cayuse?"

"And spoil a good mare?" Sam growled. "I'm not giving it the notion it's got to be toted past every hog wallow we come to." Cameron had summarily taken the better of the two saddle horses they had been furnished by the Dalles City liveryman some six hours earlier, and he easily maintained a wide lead. Come to think of it, Sam decided, Cameron had a way of grabbing off the best of everything and getting away with it in his easy fashion.

The gunfire that opened to the right of the road made a softened chunking in the rain-swept night. Sam saw Cameron dig spurs and spurt ahead. His own mount merely flicked its ears. Lead whistling past Sam's head caused him to fling himself sidedays from the saddle, landing on his shoulder in the churned mud. Not till then did the mare get a hankering to travel. It streaked out after the dissolved shape of Nick Cameron. The barking guns fell silent, and Sam guessed they must have figured him knocked loose from the saddle.

The cross-fire suited Sam, and he was willing to let them consider him finished business. He loosened the lower clasp of his slicker, cold, muddy fingers finding and removing the gun he had shoved into his pants band before leaving town. Bags, barrels, crates and packing cases made a big, disordered dump at the edge of the churned-up quagmire at this stretch of the road. From the racket, at least two gunmen had been bellied down at the top, though when he searched the jagged outlines up there he could see nothing of them.

Anger breaking up throuh his shock, Sam hungered suddenly for a target. Then he heard the sound of rapidly starting horses, beyond the heap of abandoned frieght. Two riders swung around the end and onto the road beyond the mire. They were flattened and quirting their horses, probably starting out in pursuit of Cameron. That made it impossible for Sam to play possum any longer. He swung down his gun and cut loose.

He saw a man cant, then flop out of the saddle. The other twisted, and blots of red wiped out his shape. Sam pitched into the mud again, letting the bullets shriek over him. Both horses kept pounding. Sam shoved up and pitched another shot; it was mostly temper, for by then the night had dissolved his target.

He had sunk into mud above his boot tops, and the clammy stuff ran down to encase his feet. He ploughed ahead, each step a slow and wrenching effort. He held tightly to his gun and kept his attention fixed on the still figure stretched on the road at tthe lower end of the mire. It still hadn't moved when he came up to it and stared down.

It was a small man, face buried in the mud, completely still. Sam wiped the mud from his hand and fished into a dry pocket where he had put his matches. He was nervous when he struck one against his belt buckle, for he couldn't hear the sound of running horses anymore. He hunkered over the man, rolling him over in the mud. Though the stuff was good as a mask on the lifeless face, a muddy patch over the left eye told him all he wanted to know. Sam emitted a soft whistle and let the consumed match drop into a puddle of water. He didn't know the name, but this one-eyed runt had been one of Morg Owen's stable hands.

Well, he had come out with Cameron in hopes of jumping a looter or so, and it looked like he had caught one.

The gun that cracked out was closer than he figured one to be, though the strong wind atop the headland was sweeping that way. Sam didn't even catch the gun flash, though the slug geysered mud just in front of him. Once more he embraced the mire,

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on the upper side of the dead stable hand. Then he saw the muggy shape of a horse and rider approach cautiously out of the darkness to the left of the portage road. So the other jigger had cut himself a loop and swung back secretly in defense of his mate. Growling softly, Sam lined his sights and squeezed the trigger, reflecting that something about the obscure shape of rider and cayuse looked mighty familiar.

HE SAW the rider sway in the saddle, then grab leather and catch balance. The mount wheeled and in the next second had been swallowed up in the blackness. Farther out two guns, fifty feet apart, stabbed out savagely. Sam's hammer clicked on an empty; all he could do was hug the mud, comforted that the whipping lead merely kicked it up about him. Then it ended, and he heard horses running again. They must have mistaken his failure to respond as evidence that he had finally been polished off in the withering blast when they had emptied their weapons.

Defenseless and aware that men executing cold-blooded murder would be inclined to make certain their work was successful, Sam crawled off to his left. Those running horses could be another trick to make him careless again. They wouldn't want to leave their readily identifiable, one-eyed partner up here on the headland to be found with the body of Sam Arundel. Not when they wanted it to look like the work of surprised freight looters, as Nick Cameron meant to explain it. For Sam realized now that his purser had not deserted him when the fracas started. There had been design in Cameron's taking the better livery horse and riding always at a safe distance ahead. It had been Cameron who had suggested this night prowl along the lonely portage road. For Sam Arundel knew now that the last shape to bulge out of the night had been Cameron's. Which was a hell of a note when the only quarrel between them had been over a girl the smooth, good-looking purser had already won.

Sheltered by the freight dump, Sam rose, still taking stock. He was certain he had hit Cameron, and maybe it had been bad enough to knock him out of the fight. The identity of the other rider was still a mystery. Sam crawled up on top the freight heap and concealed himself, a clammy feeling clutching him now that he realized he had been marked for a deliberate murder that had nearly come off. Maybe he would have felt better if he understood it, which he didn't at all.

Thoroughly wet and plastered with mud, the whipping wind howling across the open was a torture now. Sam estimated that he was five or six miles from town, a distasteful distance to tackle on foot even if there was no danger of their anticipating and laying another ambush for him.

Sam grew aware that horses were coming up again, and he pressed flatly into his hiding place. From his position he could see the one-eyed man's sprawled shape, below and half sunken in the mud. Sam's breath nearly stopped, and his throat hurt. When they didn't find his body, the first place they would think to search would be this big freight heap. But he had stationed himself where they couldn't get him without climbing after him, and they couldn't be sure that he had run out of ammunition.

Two horsemen came out of the darkness, holding guns in their hands. Now Sam was certain of Nick Cameron's identity; he batted his eyes when he recognized the other —Morg Owen, the company's contract hauler on the portage road. Owen's blocky figure swung down. Without speaking he lifted the dead man and slung him roughly across his horse, behind the saddle, and quickly lashed him there.

Having difficulty in keeping his windpipe open, Sam hoped they would start talking. But men engaged upon deadly business do not habitually furnish an eavesdropper with a complete blueprint of their plans. Finished with the dead stable hand, Morg Owen plucked his gun and prowled the length of the freight heap. He stood at the upper end for a long moment, scanning the open sweeps to the east. He came back on the far side of the freight heap, cut from Sam's view until he appeared again at the lower end.

Then Cameron spoke in a tight, worried voice. "Blazes, Morg, there's no sign we even pinked him!"

"He done better by you," Owen answered, in his rasping, self-possessed voice. "You're going to have fun keeping that plugged shoulder a secret. Specially when

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you go to squeezing that pretty filly of Hawthorne's."

"We've got to find him, Morg! Dammit, I told you that once we started the ball rolling, there wasn't any turning back!"

"Who's turning back? Hell, he's probably hoofing it across the hills for town. Couldn't catch him with a sheriff's posse. Maybe he even crawled into that frieght heap. I ain't going to move it all to find him. If he's guessed anything, he ain't got any proof, and we'll get a better crack at him." Owen swung into saddle, and a moment later they were swallowed up by the night.

II

IT WAS past dawn when Sam Arundel slogged wearily into the river town of Dalles City. His command, the *Mid-Columbia Queen,* was due to stand downriver at eight o'clock. He would have to take her wheel, and fatigue ate at him like an acid. He plodded the length of Second Street and turned down to the wharf boat where the big packet was tied. She rode serenely at her lines upon a fretted river, appearing wholely deserted except that steam wisping from her 'scape pipes showed that the engine-room crew was on the job.

Sam climbed the gangplank and lifted on to the texas deck. He passed his own cabin and strode on to the purser's, where he pulled the door open with a rough hand. Nick Cameron was in his bunk and had been asleep until wakened by the racket. But Cameron didn't sit up; he tugged the blankets higher under his chin, not caring to display the shoulder that by now he had probably had bandaged. But he was fully alert.

Sam had decided to play dumb until he could get his bearings, so he displayed only the peevishness a man would show who considered that he had been deserted in a tight spot by a companion.

"Thanks for the help!" he snapped. "I got one of 'em, and a couple of more kept pestering me for half an hour, till I finally sneaked off over the flat. Man I plugged was that one-eyed hostler of Morg Owen's. His carcass is still up there, I reckon, but too dead to tell who he was working with."

The relief in Cameron's face was subtle, but it was there. "Well, they didn't have any wagon, so they were probably just some small-fry thieves out to see what they could pick up. Got excited, I reckon, when we stumbled onto 'em."

"If you'd had the guts to stick around!" Sam spat back, "we might have got them all. Can't tell what it might have unraveled."

Nick Cameron brought a confident grin onto his lips now. "Sam, I couldn't help myself. I'm no horseman, and that cayuse of mine set out to travel. Figured yours'd shake the lead out and follow me. Then a couple of them cusses took out after me, and I figured I was anyhow taking them off your neck. Thought sure you'd use the chance to cut clear and head for town. That's where I headed." Sam understood the man's smooth aggressiveness a little better when he saw the assured way in which he told the bald-faced lie.

Sam let it go at that, wanting to disarm him as much as possible. He went to his own cabin, stripped off and scrubbed away the mud. He shaved his tired, lined face, then dressed in a dry uniform. The night's events began to take on a strong feeling of unreality. He certainly had come close to getting himself murdered, but it just didn't make sense that his own purser and the man hauling for the company would want his life. The contest over Amy Hawthorne, which Sam had lost, certainly had engendered nothing to justify that, and Morg Owen had shown no particular interest in it. It was a lot bigger than that; it had something to do with the big losses the company was suffering in vanished freight.

THE Columbia River was the only artery to the hundreds of remote mining camps in eastern Oregon, Idaho, and western Montana. A twelve mile stretch of rapids broke the river here at Dalles City, requiring a rough, laborious portage over the huge headland skirting them. In the base seaport of Portland, down on the Willamette, freight and passengers collected in quantities far too great for the steamboats to handle. Here at this portage it gluttered again in the confusion and carelessness of a boom prosperity. The steamboat companies expected waste and loss and set their tariffs accordingly.

But for the past six months the company

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comprised of Sam Arundel and old Cap Hawthorne had been bled white in what was patently far greater than a normal loss, though there was no telling for sure whether it was occuring here or at a dozen other points on the upper river.

Sam went to the galley for coffee and a bite of breakfast in which he took no relish. A little after seven he saw Cap Hawthorne and Amy come down from the town's main street and enter the office attached to the big freight shed on the bobbing wharf boat. Sam's gaze traveled wistfully after the girl's slim figure. Hawthorne ran the shoreside end of the business, and his daughter was at once a rose and a thorn in the life of Sam Arundel. She did office work for the company, which put her too constantly before the eyes of a hungry man who couldn't have her.

Amy Hawthorne was giving her desk its morning tidying when Sam strode in. She was dark, the prettiest thing Sam had seen on any river, with a pair of eyes that could pull the heart out of a wooden Indian. They weren't pulling now; they slapped Sam Arundel back on his heels.

"Been making a night of it again, I see," said Amy. "Scrubbing and shaving won't cover up dissipation."

Sam tramped on to her desk and halted. He gave her an easy grin and stared at the dimple on her cheek until she blushed and turned her head. "If I ever marry me a woman," he said thoughtfully, "she's going to have one of them things." Amy industriously applied her dust cloth.

Sam turned and walked into the office of Cap Hawthorne. He saw a stringy man with white hair and beard, carefully dressed and groomed. The old captain had been a packet master on the Mississippi and again in California. But here on the mid-Columbia he had found himself too old to interest the operators, who had eyes only for crack, white water men. So he had put his savings against Sam's heavily mortgaged, charter packet, the *Queen*, to form an independent company.

With a genial grin of greeting, Sam asked, "Any special orders, Skipper?" He knew that his little marks of respect pleased the old riverman. In his middle seventies, he had been obliged at last to resign himself to shoreside chores, and Sam knew he hated it and pined secretly to have the spokes of a big wheel in his bony old hands, the treadle of a loud and chorded steamboat whistle under his gaitered foot.

Pleasure glowed in the old eyes. "Nothing special, boy. You look like you been dragged through a knot hole." But there was more envy than censure in Cap Hawthorne's voice.

Sam didn't aim to trouble him about the hornets' nest he had somehow stumbled into; passenger reservations, freight pickup and delivery and the pestiferous portage haul were in Hawthorne's charge. The trouble was—and it looked like somebody was taking callous advantage of the fact—he was just too old for the job under the vigorous and rigorous conditions prevailing here. He was reminiscent, absent-minded and forgetful. He was given to falling asleep at his desk. And he resented any interference with his part of the company's responsibilities, as only a man can who hates the fact of growing old. Though it made things difficult sometimes, Sam had shown him a steady patience. A man could no more dam the flow of the years than he could put his finger on his immortal soul. And a man who had spent long years on any river could never be very happy nor very devoted to anything else.

But Sam did venture a tangent remark: "Cap, I think we're losing a lot more freight than the other companies. I've got a notion somebody's out to steal us blind. Been wondering who. Could be some outfit trying to put us out of business. Or it could be plain thieving. Had Amy show me the claims we've paid, the other day. It struck me as odd it's mostly been on the luxury class of goods: whiskey, tobacco, coffee and stuff. There was even a couple of consignments of jewelry got picked off neat as you please. The stuff isn't being thrown off at any hog-wallow on the portage, or just straying off at one of the trans-shipment points up the line. It's being sifted. Maybe by somebody who gets a good chance to look it over."

He saw a scowling truculence come up in the old man, the reaction he had tried to avoid. "Blast it, Sam!" Cap Hawthorne snorted, "I know what's going on! I've given Morg Owen so much hell he'd be scared to let his drivers pitch off even a single piece to get out of a bog. Been over

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the portage a couple of times myself, without finding any of our freight laying around."

"Tuck in your shirt tail, Cap," Sam said pleasantly. "There're some places outside your bailiwick it could be going astray. We're responsible for freight we pick up at the Cascades until we drop it f.o.b. at Umatilla Landing. That's a hundred thirty miles. I know blamed well nothing's jumping ship off my packet till we hit here. That leaves this here freight house, the portage, the freight house at The Deschutes, our charter connection on the upper river, and the freight house at Umatilla Landing. Some of them claims come from business houses here in town, but the bulk of 'em come from mining outfitters up above."

"Which don't prove where the trouble's located," the old captain snapped. "All we know for sure is that too many people show up with bills of lading for stuff we can't deliver, then get on their ear and file a big claim. One other thing we know for sure is it's ruining us. Been dreading to tell you how the treasury looks. But what makes you think somebody's stealing the stuff?"

"Somebody stealing something?" a voice boomed from beyond the doorway.

Sam straightened. Morg Owen strode in, followed by Nick Cameron, and they had apparently entered the outer office quietly from the freight shed. It dawned on Sam that he had been seen coming in to talk to Cap Hawthorne. They naturally supposed he was reporting on last night's gun ruckus out on the portage road. But if they were uneasy, neither man showed it.

"Whiskey out of my medicine locker," Sam said, grinning at them. "I was just trying to talk the skipper out of a padlock. You heard him scoff. Guess he figures I'm working on it, myself."

Morg Owen was a bulky man, still young, with head and shoulders oversized for his thighs and legs. The massive shoulders were usually carried in a slight hunch, the head forward and slightly cocked, the impression being that Morg Owen was usually on the lookout for a scrap.

Nick Cameron was dressed now in one of his tailored uniforms, presenting a resplendent figure that always made his superior on the *Queen* look like a deckhand on a garbage scow. He wasn't as tall as Sam but was built wider. And this morning he carried his upper body rather stiffly, Sam noticed, letting the left arm hang limp at his side. He had dancing brown eyes that were peculiarly alight now; assurance had been fully restored to the man.

Owen shrugged at Sam's easy parry of his truculent question. He slid his glance to Cap Hawthorne. "Sam tell you about the ruckus him and Nick got into up on the headland, playing Pinkerton? Looks like they stumbled onto some light-fingered scum from the town deadfalls. Going to get themselves killed, if they keep it up."

Cap Hawthrone looked puzzled and interested. Sam shoved to a stand. He dropped a hand heavily to Nick Cameron's left shoulder and gave it a couple of friendly, rather vigorous slaps. "You can tell him about it, Nick," he said amiably. He watched the man wince and walked out. That shoulder was going to be a handicap to the purser. He had been shot squarely from the front and at close range, which had made it impossible for him to claim he had been hit in the ambush or by one of the pair he claimed had chased him. Not to Sam Arundel, who knew exactly what had happened, and so Cameron had to conceal it from everyone else.

Through the outer office windows, Sam could see that the passengers were thickly boarding the *Queen*. The rumble of hand trucks told him the last freight was being trundled aboard, and the big wall clock showed him it was almost time to stand down the river. He would have passed Amy by had she not risen from her desk and headed him off at the outer door. If anything, she looked more annoyed than she had when he came in.

"So you've started making underhanded checks on my father's work!" she breathed. "Sam Arundel, I've read the partnership agreement. Your sole responsibility is your steamboat. It's going to hurt dad to know you've been nosing into his end of it."

He looked at the place where her dimple lived but couldn't make it show itself. "I never mentioned it to Cap," he said. "Sounds like your beau's giving him a colorful version of it, himself." He stepped out onto the wharf. Proud as nobility, the Hawthornes. He wondered what they would say if they had been with him up on that head-

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land, swept by howling wind and snarling lead.

III

THE *Queen* made her turn-around run to the Cascades portage through a heavily misted gorge. At dusk she stood in once more at the Dalles City wharf boat with a new cargo of freight and a new roster of passengers. Travelers ashore and freight discharging, Sam Arundel stood at the window of the master's cabin and watched Nick Cameron cautiously descend the gangplank and cross the wharf. Through the company office windows, Sam also watched Amy close her rolltop desk for the day. When Cameron stepped inside, she looked up at him with a girl's guarded pleasure in seeing a man she liked, and at that point Sam turned away.

He was restless and deeply uneasy, and his lanky body cried out for rest. He was one against two known enemies, and it was likely they had confederates. They had every advantage, and he had heard from Morg Owen's own lips that the planned murder would yet be accomplished successfully. He wondered what they had done with the one-eyed hostler's body and decided they had probably hidden it somewhere. Men were disappearing daily, and it would be the least complicating way Owen could handle it.

All day Sam's mind had gnawed at the problem of why they should consider it necessary to kill him. Though he had started developing questions about the undue freight loss, he had had no suspicions of that pair and could not have shown any. Reluctantly and as if he were blaming her father for it, Amy had shown him the figures. The company had paid out nearly thirty thousand dollars on claims for undelivered freight in the past six months. If the men had some fence to buy it from them, that represented a profitable enterprise, even if split three or four ways. It might even justify murder, if such became necessary. But why did they consider him in that light?

There was a knock, and at Sam's gruff bidding his mate stepped into the cabin. Clovis Kester was up in his sixties, a dour and skinny man. He had married a young woman some months previously, setting up a domicile ashore, and he was now patently anxious to get away.

"Ed says he kin handle things, Sam," Kester said. "I oughtta get home. The missus is expecting and—"

"Why, Clovis!" Sam gasped.

"Expecting me," Kester said. He grinned and ducked out.

It left Sam thoughtful. Ed Ney was the freight clerk, and he cronied a lot with Nick Cameron, who was his immediate superior. Every night for months, Clovis Kester who as mate should have overseen discharging operations, had been in a rush to get home to his expecting wife. Maybe he was getting suspicious of everybody, Sam told himself, but that left Ed Ney in a position to do much as he pleased. Right now Morg Owen's portage wagons were pulled in on the wharf, loading direct from the *Queen*. The wagons would be hauled over to Owen's big freight yard for the night, ready for an early start up the portage road on the morrow.

Sam snapped his fingers suddenly and abruptly felt a deep urge to kick himself. The portage haul was only one of several of Morg Owen's freighting enterprise. For example, when he could make up a load of excess freight the steamboats couldn't handle he often ran a freighter string all the way to Umatilla Landing. These wagons also made up their loads at Owen's freight yard. A perfect place for a sifting job. Maybe Sam Arundel was in for another night of what Amy had called dissipation.

He turned back to his cabin window in time to see Amy and Cameron leave the wharf boat and head up toward the town, both chatting in interested animation. They made a handsome couple, Sam admitted, and how long was honor going to keep him from telling her what kind of a reptile she had got herself interested in? It gave his heart a twist. She was going to be hurt, or she was going to marry a man, unknowingly, with the conscience of a beast.

Sam figured he would never have had a show with her, even if Cameron hadn't come along. He raised her hair every time he passed close to her, it seemed. He did like his good time in the haunts where the river breed hung out, and she was strict as a school ma'am in lots of ways. But as alive and warm-hearted as they came in the ones

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that counted. A man could sense that in her and go crazy because she didn't cotton to him.

SAM ate his supper in the *Queen's* dining room and afterward stretched on his bunk to sleep. The grooved habit of standing watches wakened him at the end of four hours. He moved yawning to the window and saw that the town, which reached its fullest life at night was alight and humming. He dressed, pulled on cap and great coat, reloaded his gun and slipped it into his large outer pocket. Leaving the *Queen*, he made his way indolently to Charley's, a resort favored by the river breed.

He spent another hour there in easy talk with cronies connected with the river and portage. He spotted no Owen teamsters, but evenso left the place with discretion, heading for the cubicles standing in the back yard and bypassing them to cut through a hole in Charley's fence. This put him into an alleyway, which he followed to his right. He ducked swiftly across intervening streets and kept going until he came to the west edge of town.

He paused a moment to make certain he had not been followed. A large affair of corrals, board fences and sagging barns loomed ahead of him on the river flat, the base of Morg Owen's freighting enterprises. Here and there he could see the pale glow of a lantern, unmoving and probably nothing but night lights. He moved cautiously along the back of a board fence until he came to an opening that let him into a big compound filled with close-parked freight wagons with dropped tongues. He slipped quickly into cover and paused for another look.

The biggest barn was directly across from him. It had a huge front door that rolled on a track, and this was tight shut. But there was light inside, seen dimly through the cracks in the wall. They blinked rather rapidly as something passed between them and Sam Arundel. Yet the general scene was completely tranquil.

Presently he slipped to his left, keeping on the blind side of the wagons. He came eventually to a small door, which the strong smell of ammonia and the stirring within identified as the opening to the stables. He stepped through this, lifting out his gun, hearing a distant drone of voices, a rumbling and banging like that of shifted freight. He prowled carefully along the passage behind the stalled freight horses.

Half down he came upon a break in the stall row that opened into the barn's interior. Except for the glow of indirect light, something cut off his view. Alternately he moved and waited, creeping toward that area. Men were still talking in soft, brief sentences, and there was still the sound of something being moved. His hand contacted the obstructing wall, and he discovered that it was a pile of baled hay, stacked nearly to the rafters. He moved along behind this, steps deadened by the heavily littered floor, until he came to an upright cleated to make a ladder.

He climbed this carefully, finding himself at last on top the hay pile. He bellied to the other side, coming up carefully to the edge with held breath, finding himself gazing down upon a scene he had half expected to find but whose reality shocked him.

Two freight wagons had been backed in behind the huge and now carefully closed door, and they stood side by side, tailgates dropped. A man worked in the near wagon, managing its contents piece by piece to the rear end. There a muscular pair received it and held it for the inspection of Ed Ney, the *Queen's* freight clerk, who checked a way bill and either nodded or shook his head. If he nodded, the piece went into the second wagon. If otherwise, it was piled to the side. Idle but watching the operation closely was Morg Owen, himself.

So this was the sifting process, by which they picked off the most costly consignments the company hauled. Sam's fingers itched on the trigger of his gun, the command to surrender itched in his throat. He restrained himself carefully. He could doubtless get the jump on them, but what would this prove? Ed Ney would only claim there had been some mix-up he was trying to untangle, and every other man present would back the explanation. Much as he disliked the enormity of its implication, Sam realized he would have nothing incriminating until he could catch somebody turning unlawfully possessed freight over to an unlawful consignee.

But it was a starter. He knew what was being done and what would probably be

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done after this. He had a lot more to work on than he had had before, even if he still didn't know why they hankered to murder one Sam Arundel. Which they had tried even before he had dreamed of doing any spying like this. And which they would certainly re-attempt if they caught him at it.

He slithered back across the hay pile, located the ladder in the darkness and let himself down. He was turning when something whacked him hard across the head, filling his vision with a burst of fire. It broke him to his knees, and something landed again across his back, and a voice yelped, "Hey, boys, I caught something!"

Sam twisted and drove blindly forward, grasping a pair of legs and spilling their owner hard on the litter. He drove a fist into the man's belly, broke free and climbed to his feet. Not till then did he realize he had dropped his gun. There was no time to hunt it; he spun and drove into the darkness, hoping he could find his way back to the stable. They were coming after him. Then he crashed face on against an upright of some kind and reeled back with men piling all over him.

They jerked him roughly to his feet, but Sam was too dazed to think much of it for a moment. A lantern swung up, and Sam heard a voice gasp, "Criminy, it's the skipper!" and recognized genuine terror in the voice of Ed Ney, his freight clerk. Angry men half dragged Sam to the better lighted area by the secreted freight wagons.

Morg Owen faced him with plain hatred in his eyes. "I thought you'd fed Cameron the hook, line and sinker when you got back this morning, Arundel. Had a man looking for prowlers. But I'm glad you decided to play a lone hand. Old Hawthorne didn't know a thing about last night." He flipped his glance to a pair of burly, hard-faced teamsters. "Rope him, boys, and shove a gunnysack into his mouth. You know where to take him, and you know what to do when you get there."

Somehow Sam refrained from showing the raw fear that cut through him. Two men were pinioning his arms behind him, with four more standing around and maybe others in easy calling distance. His head ached thumpingly from the rap he had suffered; his vision kept jumping out of focus. He summoned arguments and protests to mind and knew they would be useless. He hadn't understood why they had wanted him dead before, but he had given them a second and tangible reason.

IV

THEY had traveled but a short way along the old Indian trail following the river flat east of town when Sam guessed where they were heading. He was the second of a file of three horsemen, with his wrists bound to the saddle horn. They hadn't gagged him since they had been obliged to ride through the back streets of the town, but he knew there was a gun behind ready to lift and fire at the slightest provocation.

The trail had looped down against the gigantic field of eroded rock that was the lower end of the long, violent rapids. Ahead was a place where the river was said to turn on its edge, the long, depthless turmoil of Five Mile Rapid. Sam rode with a chilled deadness of mind, only wondering if this was where the one-eyed hostler had vanished, if even others had not made this same forlorn ride.

There was the barest hint of moon; there was the heavy grind of the tortured river beating at his ears. They came to a place where the lead horseman turned down toward the rocks studding the shore. Sam knew the area, having fished here a few times. Great broken patterns of basalt hugged the river and rose violently from its depths, splitting the stream and speeding it, hurling its rush heavily from side to side.

The horses picked their careful way among the rocks. Upon a flat with a sharp lip dropping sheer to the water, the leader halted and swung down. The other followed suit, with Sam remaining motionless until they came and untied his wrists from the saddle horn. He was stiff and chilled throughout. Taking no chances, both men had pulled guns.

The leader grunted, "This here's your getting off place, Arundel. Nobody that's ever spilled into the drink here's been found afterwards. But if you do come up, you won't have nothing but a crack on the head. Hit it on a rock, maybe, they'd say."

Every muscle in Sam's body was tight, too tight. He tried to speak but a constriction in his throat prevented it. His wrists had

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been so tightly bound that his hands were numbed. Owen's men watched him like hawks, relishing the moment of mental torture. But a bullet was better than drowning, Sam decided. And they would hesitate before putting a hole in him.

He surged toward the man on his right, who seemed to rely upon his mate for initiative. The man shoved back, tensing as if to fire, when the other rasped, "Easy, Pete! We can handle him!" Sam rammed the man, bringing him down in a heap, desperately longing for that gun. The other man leaped forward, seeking a chance to swing his gun barrel. Sam tied his man up, fingers clamped on the wrist of the fellow's gun hand The gun barrel swung hard, catching Sam a glancing blow on the side of the head, rolling him onto his side.

He held his clutch, but his immediate adversary came up with an enormous heave that brought both up to their knees. The swinging gun arched back and came down again, but Sam dodged it by a hair's breadth. He shoved partly to his feet, his man lunging against him, driving Sam back. The other yelped, "Hey, watch it, Pete!"

Sam went cold suddenly as a foot he shoved backward to brace himself skidded on into empty space. He had lost bearings in the struggle, as had the man he still held onto, he realized, when the fellow bleated in sudden terror. Sam clung to him, trying to regain balance. Then both tottered, and they fell together.

Sam let go, trying to straighten himself out as he plunged. He hit the water with a deadening splash, feeling its cold, hard side thrust. Down in the murky, speeding depths he had his moment of panic. The cold shock of the water helped him throw it off, instinct taking command. He unbuttoned his heavy coat and struggled out of it. He fought his way to the surface and found himself rushing past the narrow walls of rock shaping the gut. There was no sign of the Owen's man, and for him Sam felt no concern.

He conserved his strength, using it only to keep himself on or close to the surface. He estimated his chances of coming through and found them dismal. Though rounded in its speed, the water offered no lethal boils or whirlpools, and his effort was to save himself from being scraped and macerated against the rocks. Yet half a dozen guts in this reach laced into each other, tumbling in falls along the way and shattering upon small rock islands. His only hope was to ride it through, pitting his strength against time and the river's fearful energy.

He thought of the tremendous big eddy below, probably a mile across, but free of menacing rocks and this ghastly rush. Steeling himself, carefully planning his efforts, he let himself be carried by the water's will. He went under, he was thrown and hauled about, gasping and choking and nearly drained of his strength. The current continually picked up, the rock walls of the gut blurring past. Then they broadened, and almost before he knew it he had been flung out into the big eddy.

The river turned the eddy in a vast wheeling, water from the guts stabbing into it and mushrooming as individual forces blended in the greater movement. Pitting his remaining strength against the certainty of death, he began to swim stubbornly pulling ever to his left, using the current but trying to control his direction. He fought his way into quieter water after what seemed hours, and this awareness released a reserve of energy in him. He worked stubbornly to his left, dropping continually downstream. The distant bank came closer and kept enlarging. At last he was in water that seemed slack after what he had experienced. Now he floated along, getting back his breath. Then he struck out in a final effort to make shore. Presently he felt the blessed crunch of a gravel shoal under his feet.

He lurched forward, teeth chattering violently, and came out upon the sandy gravel under a bluff. There he spilled down and let the blackness of exhaustion have its way with him.

An hour later he found a way to the top. He walked swiftly to heat his chilled body. As vitality rose in him again, he recalled Morg Owen's last warning to his two men: "Don't you sons go getting a snootful after you get done with Arundel. The wagons 're rolling for Umatilla Landing at daylight. You blamed well better be in shape for it."

IT WAS still well before daybreak when Sam reached the house of Clovis Kester, on the east edge of town. He came up by the back way and his knocking finally brought

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the *Queen's* aging mate in his red underwear. Kester stared at him.

"Invite me in, Clovis," Sam said. "You're going to build me a fire so I can dry out, and you're going to boil me a gallon of coffee."

"Caught out in the rain?" Kester asked.

"Call it that." Sam followed Kester inside, and the mate touched a match to the kindling already set in the kitchen stove. The new wife did not appear.

Sitting by the stove and pulling off his soggy boots, Sam said. "Clovis, I'm deader'n hell."

"Sometimes I think I am," Kester said regretfully.

"And I'm going to stay dead a while," Sam resumed. "Maybe permanent, if it don't come out right." He told the mate about the events upon the headland portage road, about Morg Owen's barn and the struggle at the river. "They'll figure it's ten to one I'm on the bottom of Five Mile for keeps. They'll get bolder now. Owen's sending wagons to Umatilla Landing this morning. I've got a notion a lot of company freight's on it. Trouble is, they could be rendezvousing with whoever's buying it anywhere along the road. I'm going to catch me a ride on those wagons."

"You're no cat," Kester said. "Don't figure you got a handful of lives left. If they catch you another time, they'll make damned sure you don't slip through their fingers again."

Sam nodded. "That's one reason why I come to see you. I'll show up missing when it's time to stand down with the *Queen*. I'll be gone three-four days, anyhow, and you'll have to take her over. I reckon a rumor'll get started I'm probably off on a drunk somewhere. Owen'll see that something reasonable gets started. You let it go at that. But if I'm not back in a week, tell Cap Hawthorne what I told you."

Kester stroked his jaw uneasily. "You're crowding your luck. You can't get the breaks all the time."

THE first dilutions of dawn appeared beyond the windows by the time Sam had dried out clothing and boots and dressed again. From Kester he borrowed a hat, heavy coat and gun, and the mate stuffed a supply of thick sandwiches in the coat pocket. Then Sam slipped out into the greying dawn.

The portage road ran past not far from Kester's house, and a few lighter portage wagons had already rolled past, starting for the Deschutes. Sam turned out of town, when he came to the road, hiding in a clump of brush a half mile up to await the outfit he wanted. Day began to lighten, with more portage wagons passing. Then he saw the larger shape of Morg Owen's long-coupled freight outfit. He noted with satisfaction as it came up that the teamster who had been at Five Mile was on the wheel horse, at the jerkline. Morg Owen rode the buck plank. He let it pass, then slipped from cover and swung up into the hind wagon.

The day jarred drearily on. The hind wagon unfortunately proved to hold no soft bales or bags, and Sam found himself continually experimenting for a method of lying comfortably upon the irregular tops of kegs, packing cases and barrels. As they left the portage and tooled out upon the high, open Columbia plateau, wind slatted the wagon sheets, reaching Sam and striking through him. He felt a sharp discouragement when he discovered that none of this wagon's load bore a company label but was all from a Dalles City supply house and consigned to one Linus Prior at Umatilla Landing.

The outfit halted at noon while the horses were watered and fed from nose bags. Sam pressed flat and breathless in his hiding place until it moved on. He munched a sandwich, feeling the pangs of a growing thirst he could not satisfy. The wagons crept stolidly eastward throughout the afternoon, with only brief pauses to blow the horses after a stiff climb. If there was to be a wayside rendezvous, it apparently was not to be on this end of the haul.

In twilight the outfit forded the John Day, and shortly after dark left the muddy trail and made camp. Daring a look through a slit where wagon sheets overlapped, Sam saw they were in Rock Creek canyon. Thirst now gnawed at him, and he kept thinking of the water they had splashed through at the John Day, that now was chugging past him in the creek, hoping that somewhere in the night he would get his chance to emerge from hiding. Then to his dismay, Owen and the teamster picked a natural rock

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shelter abreast Sam's wagon for their camp.

Groaning inwardly, Sam settled for a long wait while they fixed supper. Cooking odors drifted to him, and his jaw worked when he saw Owen lift a canteen to his lips and drink heartily. Yet the closeness of their campfire proved to be a blessing.

Digesting his supper and smoking by the fire, the teamster turned talkative. "With Arundel out of the way, there ain't anything to stop you from the big jump, is there, Morg?"

"Dunno yet," Owen's voice responded. "Got some chores to do first."

The teamster cackled. "Neatest caper I ever heard of. Busting a outfit by stealing it blind, then buying it with its own money for mebbe half price. Profits ever way you look. You're a smart jigger, Morg. I gotta hand it to you. But it sure took a lot of work to get shed of Arundel. But old Hawthorne'll fold up fast once he gets it through his head his partner just ain't going to show up again. He'll get his whiskers in the machinery so bad he'll be glad to turn the business over to you any price you care to name."

"Even so, we got to go easy," Owen answered. "That girl of Hawthorne's got spunk, and sometimes I think she's got brains. Don't like the way she looks at me."

"Aw, Nick Cameron'll handle her. Soft job he's got in this, just making love to that pretty filly to get her off guard and feed her full of advice. Anyhow, she'll be ready to throw it up when they get another big batch of claims to pay. Which they're gonna get even if they don't know it yet."

"Don't get too cocky!" Owen snapped. "We still got this job to do in Umatilla Landing. That Prior's got more twists'n a snake. Once he finds out we got the company he's apt to put a big bite on us. Smartest thing is to get rid of him, too, before we make the big play, just like we got rid of Arundel. That's got to be tended to before we leave the landing."

Listening with bated breath, Sam forgot his discomfort momentarily as the missing piece of the puzzle fell neatly into place. He knew now why they had deemed it necessary to kill him, what their game was, and why Morg Owen was heading for Umatilla Landing. Linus Prior was a mine supply dealer there. Apparently he had been buying the stolen freight, probably at an attractive discount. And, without realizing it, Linus Prior seemed to have got himself into a tight spot. But Sam realized that he still did not know how Owen was getting the stolen freight to Prior, unless it was in the wagons ahead, and that he still had nothing sufficiently tangible to bring them to justice.

V

IT WAS late the next evening when the freight outfit rumbled into the ugly, strung-out, river-town jump-off to the Powder River and south Idaho gold mines. Battered and cold and long without decent rest, Sam Arundel swung off short of the town, waited a while in the open, wind-scoured darkness, then entered on foot. Bearded and bundled though he was, he moved carefully, not wanting to attract even the suspicion of recognition.

He was unsettled as to his plans. He knew a man in this town who was marked for murder and he felt a moral obligation to warn Linus Prior. Yet he feared that this would seriously handicap him. He had endured much to secure the proof he sought against Morg Owen and even Prior, himself, proof which he did not yet possess except as it had been recorded in his own mind.

This was a town of lusty boom proportions. The sidewalks were jammed with a motley assortment of rough and hurried men. Freight wagons and pack strings were strung along the wide, churned street. Before the best hotel a muddy stagecoach, in from the hinterland, was unloading cold, tired travelers in to catch the downriver steamboat in the morning. Sam saw the company charter packet, the *Voyager*, tied up for the night at one of the wharf boats. The Owen outfit had pulled up before the big freighthouse of Linus Prior, on the west edge of town. Sam noted this with interest. He aimed to do some investigating there when the time was more suitable.

He took a room in a ramshackle hotel apart from the main activity, but not far from Prior's warehouse. He lacked clean clothes and shaving gear, but he scrubbed up in the room's scant warmth, afterward stretching out on the lumpy bed and finding it soft as eider down after the jolting wagon.

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Drowsiness rushed upon him, and before he knew what was happening, he was asleep.

He wakened with a sense of annoyance at himself and climbed to his feet. His window opened on a littered back lot palely washed in moonlight. But his ears told him that the town's robust racket had faded out. He dressed swiftly, assured himself that the gun was still in his greatcoat pocket, then descended the back stairs.

The river breeze struck strongly against his face when he emerged. Dark clouds ran up to threaten the pale, full moon. Sam moved along behind the buildings until he came to the rear of the structure he recognized as Prior's warehouse. He found a big double door that showed no outside lock, but which did not yield when he tried it. There was a one inch crack beyond which no light appeared. Sam used his jack-knife to probe the crack and locate a length of board set behind brackets to secure the double doors. He began to work at it, picking and prying the wooden bolt along its channel. Once some obstruction nearly ended the effort, then he got going again and presently swung a door slightly outward and stepped inside.

He shut the door hastily and slid the bolt back into place. The interior was big and lofty, smelling heavily of its contents. There was enough light from a row of high windows on a sidewall to give him his bearings. He looked around, seeing great stacks of cased goods, barrels and bags. Most of it was ordered efficiently as if by a good warehouseman. But as he prowled to the front of the vast room he detected heaped stuff which he knew was newly received and not yet processed.

Fearing the presence of a night watchman somewhere, Sam slid on to the front of the building. He came upon a walled-off room appearing to serve as the office. There was nothing to indicate that anybody was on the premises at night, which suited him. He needed a light, and he discovered a lantern standing on a roll-top desk that had been closed for the night. He took it and retraced his route, closing the inside door of the office to shut himself off from the street.

He lighted the lantern and began his careful inspection. It was not hard to identify the big heap of merchandise unloaded from Owen's freight wagons that night, which was still dumped by the big street doors. Sam looked it over piece by piece, finding nothing that could tell him anything. He was about to extinguish the lantern when he noted a smaller stack of cases on the opposite side of the big doors and strung along the office partition.

It was uniform and had been stacked neatly, and each box end bore the burned brand name of a high-priced whiskey popular in the gold camps. His practiced eye counting up and across, he estimated that there were better than a hundred cases. He strode over, recalling that a few trips back there had been a whiskey shipment in this brand aboard the *Queen*. It had caught his attention for it was too expensive for a mere riverman, and he and Clovis Kester had joked about sidetracking a case in the wheelhouse. He remembered that it had been consigned to a big saloon in the king-pin camp of Auburn.

It wasn't now. Interest kindled in Sam's eyes as he looked at a waybill, one of the company's own. The consignee shown was Linus Prior at Umatilla Landing, nothing more or less. The shipper was the same, a large wholesale house down in Portland. Everything seemed in perfect order. It had come all the way openly and via company facilities. But Sam knew that the original way bill had been removed in Morg Owen's barn in Dalles City, this one substituted, a process that must have been repeated a thousand times in the past several months. By prying up a corner of the counterfeit, he could see where the pasted original had been ripped off.

This was something, Sam told himself hotly. Using the company's own facilities, they were draining it dry, meaning to weaken it to a point where they could buy it for a song with its own money. A man couldn't ask for anything with less overhead than that.

Sam hastily extinguished the lantern. Boots pounded along the walk, but they passed on. He slipped out the back way, patiently bolting the door again. He had what he wanted, the first piece of tangible evidence so far. This was a county seat. He could get the sheriff to seize the whiskey shipment. Prior could be ordered to show where he had placed a bonafide order for it.

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It was a hundred to one that the Portland wholesalers would have no record of either order or shipment to Prior. They quite probably would have records to show the rightful consignee. Linus Prior was Sam's key, and Morg Owen had strongly hinted that the man was to die before the wagons struck out for Dalles City again.

SHORTLY after daylight, Sam was at the sheriff's house, talking to a scrawny, middle-aged man who heard him out with a deepening scowl. "You don't surprise me any," the sheriff commented. "I've known Prior's been mixed up with a lot of shady stuff hereabouts. Never been able to get a thing on him, though."

"The point is," Sam said, "you've got to seize that whiskey shipment, and you've got to keep Linus Prior alive till we can twist the truth out of him."

"Make official charges," the sheriff said promptly, "and I'll lock the cuss up before he's had time to eat his breakfast. He lives over in the Bella Union."

"What do I sign?" Sam asked.

Five minutes later he was matching the sheriff's long-gaited stride along the side walk. Though hastily thrown up, as were most of the town's score of other business buildings, the Bella Union hotel presented a respectable appearance. Sam mounted the stairs with the sheriff and halted at the door number the room clerk had given them. The sheriff tried the lock, rapped loudly and when there was no response cheerfully used a pass key.

As the door swung open, Sam say a man lying motionless in bed, covered to the plump, sagging chin by blankets, small open eyes staring fixedly at the ceiling. Sam bounded across the floor and threw back the covers. He was not surprised to see the blood-choked chest and bedding. The knife had been removed, but Linus Prior had been stabbed in the heart in his sleep. His only physical reaction apparently had been to open his eyes.

The sheriff lingered at the door, taking it in stride, for such discoveries were not infrequent in a stampeder town. The door's regular key lay on the floor. "Somebody else has got a pass key," the man remarked. "Looks like Prior wasn't expecting trouble, or he'd of slept with a ear open."

Sam stepped through the door and headed down the stairs. He had no idea where Morg Owen's freight outfit had been left for the night. A half hour later he had scoured the town without locating it. Owen and his teamster had done their work and hit the Dalles City trail.

Sam subsided then, despair emptying him. Without Prior alive to furnish the link, he could only prove that a dead man had been receiving freight not lawfully consigned to him. There would be every indication that a company employee was involved, but there still was nothing to implicate those at the bottom of it.

He heard a steamboat at the landing whistle its departure warning. He encountered the sheriff as he raced past the Bella Union and shouted, "Hold onto that whiskey shipment!" and raced on toward the river.

The *Voyager*, which was the packet connecting with the *Queen* for the upper reach of the Columbia, was casting out. Her passengers had already scuttled into her interior to escape the wind fanning the decks. The gangplank had been pulled in, and Sam made a wild, broad jump getting aboard. A deckhand grinned at him and went on about his work. Sam turned down the starboard sidedeck, aiming to ascend to the wheelhouse and declare himself to Mark Wilder, the master.

He found himself standing face to face with a man who held a gun in his hand. The near cabin door stood open, and the man stood just outside, blocking the passage.

"Inside, Arundel," Morg Owen said, motioning toward the door. Though he must have felt shock at the appearance here of a man he supposed dead, he covered it well. "Fast, and keep your hands away from your sides."

Sam noted the glitter in Owen's eyes, the high-keyed intent. The freighter had murdered or caused murder, in the night; the heated tensions still held him. Sam decided against defying him at this point, stepped into the cabin and let Owen close the door.

Owen sidled across the cabin. "Put your back against the wall and keep your arms out like you were flying. If you've got a stinger, I want it. You're a hard man to kill, Arundel. You gave me a turn when I seen you sifting it down from town. All right,

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you got out of the drink. But what're you doing up here?"

"Hunting a cow," Sam said, grinning at him, though he felt no amusement. "How-come a tough freighter's riding the river?"

"Hunting a fish," Owen snapped. He had stepped in and frisked Sam, keeping his gun barrel shoved hard into the river-man's belly. He found the gun in Sam's coat pocket and extracted it, shoving it into the band of his own pants. Something ugly twisted into the expression on his face kept Sam from objecting to the disarming. But it was a long way to the Deschutes. If Owen aimed to kill again, he was not apt to do it until just before he left the packet, since things had developed the habit of slipping up on him.

Owen backed to the cabin's one chair and seated himself, never letting his gun swerve from its bead on Sam's belt buckle. "Take the bunk, Arundel," he said. "If you want to snooze, that's all right, too."

VI

THE hours slipped past with the bare, basaltic shores of the river. Thoughts swirled in Sam's mind, born of determination to bring this elusive devil to justice and greater than his self-concern. He remained passive and outwardly undisturbed while Willow Creek and Owyhee Rapids fell behind. For the past hour a slanting rain had fallen, keeping the passengers off the decks. The only ones to pass along the sidedeck outside this cabin's window were crew members hurrying about their business.

Sam waited patiently, knowing something as a riverman that Morg Owen could not know. Wilder, the skipper, would in all probability have been at the wheel out of Umatilla Landing. At the end of his trick, he would turn it over to the mate and descend to mingle among the passengers in the main cabin. Sam had no way of marking the time, but Wilder seemed inordinately slow about that routine duty today.

They were roughing down Indian Rapids when Sam saw the shape he awaited move past the window. Ignoring the warning look on Owen's face, Sam ripped out at the top of his voice, "Hey, Wilder, you old river rat!"

The captain hauled up instantly. A venemous light showed in Morg Owen's eyes, and for a moment Sam thought he was going to shoot out of sheer fury. But Wilder's hand jerked open the cabin door, he framed himself in the doorway and boomed, "Sam, what the devil're you doing aboard? Trying to deadhead on me?"

Sam got up from the bunk, wholly easy in manner. Owen had slid his gun out of sight and sat stolidly, eyes veiling his outrage. "Aimed to come up and pay my respects, Mark. But I run into a dear old friend of mine—Morg Owen here. Shake hands with Morg, if he can get his fingers out from under his seat. We got to gassing each other, and time slipped past." Owen never offered his hand. Rising, Sam gave him a pleasant smile. "Well, excuse me, Morg. I'll go show these people how to run a steamboat." He went out, making a point of leaving ahead of Wilder.

They went up to the texas, where Wilder poured drinks. It would be, Sam concluded, a very pleasant place to spend the rest of the journey.

The *Voyager* reached the Deschutes wharfboats in early afternoon. Sam waited in the wheelhouse until he was certain that Owen had gone ashore and caught one of his freight wagons for the trip down over the portage. He caught the last portage stage, comforted by having other passeners about him.

Winter's early dusk was running in when he reached Dalles City. He headed at once for the company wharf boat, and as he reached the road to the river he saw the *Queen* heave into sight, returning from the Cascades turn-around under Clovis Kester's temporary command. He changed his mind about going in to see Cap Hawthorne, and waited at the street intersection. There was a man aboard the *Queen* he wanted to get his hands on as soon as possible.

When the *Queen* had swung in and made fast, Sam dropped down the mired, slanted road and went aboard. Clovis Kester saw him ascend the gangplank and yelled down from the wheelhouse. Sam waved a greeting but kept on, taking a companionway and pounding down to the freight deck.

Ed Ney, the freight clerk, was opening a side door, getting ready to discharge freight. He turned around from the chore, noted

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Sam, and halted in complete stillness. Sam recalled the initial fear Ney had shown that night in Owen's freight barn. He hoped, with luck, to make something out of it.

"Howdy, Ed," Sam said. "Hope you don't mind me coming up here to get warm. The bottom of that river's the coldest damned place I ever been in."

Ney's mouth was open, and his jaw jerked. "Arundel! But they—they took you to Five Mile—!"

"And pitched me in," Sam agreed. "This is the craziest blamed river you ever seen, Ed. I wound up in Umatilla Landing, a hundred miles up the creek." He dropped a hand on Ney's skinny shoulder and dug in fingers that were by no means ghostly. "The Umatilla sheriff's got that last whiskey consignment you switched labels on, fellow. Prior's dead from a knife Morg Owen or that ugly-faced teamster of his slid between his ribs. Mister, how do you know you won't be the next to get it?"

Ney winced. "Don't know what you're talking about—!"

"No use lying!" Sam snapped. "I saw you over there in Owen's barn, working over another shipment. You don't have to believe me. If you've got guts enough to wait, you'll hear about Linus Prior dying with a knife in his heart. They got through with him, and you can sweat wondering if they figure they're through with you, too. Or if they've got a scheme to make a goat out of you in case anything backfires. You got that kind of guts, Ed, or'd you rather have the sheriff lock you in a nice safe cell? Freight stealing'll only get you a few years. Morg Owen's knife'd put you out of business for keeps."

Under other circumstances Sam might have felt sorry for Ed Ney. The man's eyes were dull, his face twitched as shock piled on shock. "Morg's already threatened to kill me! Once I nearly scared out, and he said—!"

The sharp crack of a gun punched into Sam's ears, the low-ceilinged freight deck thundering as a second and a third shot ripped out. Somthing flung Sam flat on his back; he stared frozenly as Ed Ney pitched across his legs. The shooting stopped, and he heard boots pound up the distant companionway. Then the binnacle lantern over the freight desk began to whirl about him, faster and faster until it spun off into a world of darkness.

CLOVIS KESTER was bent over him when next Sam knew anything. Something hard was shoved against his teeth, and at first Sam thought it was a gun barrel. But fluid ran into his mouth as he opened his eyes, and he swallowed a gulp of whiskey. "Easy," Kester's distant voice was saying. "Somebody nearly sliced a ear off of you. Somebody sure as hell blowed a big hole in Ed Ney's head. If he was telling you anything, he's telling the rest to the devil."

"Who?" Sam gasped.

"How do I know? First thing I heard was shooting, then somebody pounded it. One thing I know for sure is, he never left the boat. Was where I could see the gangplank and the whole dockside."

"Nick Cameron!" Sam breathed, cursing his own folly. The purser must have seen him come aboard and eavesdropped from the foot of the companion. It was only a short jump from the top to the purser's office.

"Mebbe," Kester agreed. "But who seen him?"

Blood ran down Sam's cheek and dripped over his front. He saw that the deck force stood around him, staring-eyed and stern-featured, together with the engineroom crew. But nobody had been in the way when Nick Cameron slipped down and destroyed the one last chance Sam had to pin the deadwood on him and his accomplice. So far Cameron's part had been passive, but now he had turned cold-blooded killer. As Morg Owen had killed or caused a killing to be done in Umatilla Landing. Sam got groggily to his feet and staggered toward the companionway.

Sam made no charges when the Wasco Country sheriff and the coroner came to investigate the murder and near-murder. Kester had applied first-aid to Sam's wound, and afterward Sam went with him to a doctor's office to grit his teeth while the medico took half a dozen stitches. He emerged with a bandaged head, which seemed to be all that kept it from bursting at the seams. Not until then did he get around to wondering out loud by Cap Hawthorne and Amy had shown no interest in the shooting on the *Queen,* which they must have heard

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and which must have happened before they left for home.

"They kited it for Portland the morning you didn't show up," Kester said. "And they looked worried."

Sam scowled at him. "You didn't jump the gun and tell 'em what I told you?"

"Nope. It was their own notion. Was supposed to get back today, but they weren't at the Cascades landing. Don't ask me what they went about. They didn't take me into their confidence."

The mate had turned along the sidewalk with Sam, heading back toward the river. "You better get home," Sam said, "before the missus gets a notion you dried up and blew away."

"Already sent a kid to tell her I won't be home tonight. Looks like them devils've set out to shoot the case against 'em full of holes. You ain't got many lives left. I'm bunking with you."

"I can take care of myself," Sam growled.

"Hell, who cares about you?" Kester snorted. "What if they take a notion you told me all about it? I just want to stay where I can borry your luck in a hurry."

In spite of a splitting head, Sam found himself able to eat his first decent meal in days. Sometime before the sheriff showed up, Nick Cameron had slipped off the packet, and he did not put in an appearance all evening. With Amy Hawthorne out of town, Sam supposed he was someplace with Morg Owen catching up on his plotting. Sam utilized the opportunity to bathe, shave and don fresh clothes. His cabin was double-bunked, and the mate stretched out in the upper one, silently brooding, Sam supposed, upon this first evening he had deserted his new wife.

"Anyhow," Kester had mused, "them skunks are sorta punishing themselves. Don't that make four of 'em as got the kind of justice he had coming?"

It did, but it was the two who were left that worried Sam — the kingpins. He couldn't keep on playing this game of elimination much longer. But as far as he knew, Morg Owen did not know how much Sam Arundel had learned at Umatilla Landing. He didn't know that the Umatilla sheriff was going to seize a whiskey shipment that had been misdirected enroute to wind up in Linus Prior's hands. Sam figured he had driven a peg there, and if he could find the proper rope he might bust somebody out on it. But search his mind as he would, he couldn't find the rope.

There was the shoulder wound Nick Cameron had got himself that night up on the portage road and had felt it wise to conceal. Yet by now he had probably thought up a dozen different ways of explaining it. And that would throw no loop on Morg Owen, who was developing into the slipperiest customer Sam had ever encountered. A jury might possibly be persuaded to convict Owen on the basis of circumstantial evidence. But again it might not. Sam had no taste for giving the man a chance to wiggle out of it.

His bunk felt good to his tired body. Sam crawled in and shut his eyes, and all the repressed sleep in him clambered up to possess him. But it was shallow, half-relaxed rest, strung across with wild dreams which Amy Hawthorne seemed to dominate. Hating him, sneering at him for nosing into her father's business and failing at it miserably, inviting him with her eyes only to scratch him with her fingers, lifting her lips to him only to bite his nose. Then she had a gun in her hand and she squeezed it off, the blast driving full into his face.

He could still smell powder smoke when he jerked his eyes open and sat up. Clovis Kester swung out of the upper bunk and dropped down, in his underwear, a scarecrow figure with a gun in its hand. Then Sam saw the shape on the floor, a uniformed shape lying face down.

"What the devil?" Sam gasped.

"Visitor," Kester answered. "A ex-visitor. We should of thought to of took our purser's master key away from him. Good thing I got homesick and couldn't sleep." The mate found matches on the table and flamed the wall lamp. Sam saw at a glance that the man on the floor was indeed Nick Cameron, with blood running out from under his head. Close to his relaxed hand was a long-bladed knife. Kester nudged it with a bare toe on which perched an enormous corn. "Justice has been issued again. Couple of more seconds, and he'd of stuck you. Was in and on top of you before I could fish this pacifier out from under my pillow."

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VII

"YOU running a slaughter house down here?" the sheriff was asking Sam an hour later. "Maybe this says who killed Ed Ney and mebbe it don't. If you're holding anything back, Arundel, you better fork it over." The official had a frown puckered above his eyes.

Sam sighed and told the whole story, knowing as he had with the Umatilla sheriff that he was advancing what would sound like unsubstantiated supposition.

It sounded that way to the sheriff. "All right, I lock up Morg Owen and that ugly teamster of his they call Monk Vines. They just tell the grand jury they had no part in it, that you're a damned liar. So the law's got to prove otherwise. Anyhow, if this goes on, you're going to run out of anybody to have arrested."

"Or he's going to run out of lives," Kester said. "Well, you asked to see his hole card, Sheriff. It ain't his fault if it's only a deuce."

Sam was at the *Queen's* wheel at eight o'clock, prepared to stand her down the old familiar gut. Doubling for the packet's subtracted purser, Clovis Kester was at the head of the gangplank receiving passengers. Yet Sam tensed, even as he saw the old mate pull himself up straight. Coming across the wharf in a town suit and carrying a grip was Morg Owen, and beside him paced the teamster the sheriff had called Monk Vines. The pair came boldly up the gangplank. Kester pitched a questioning glance to Sam, who signalled to let them come aboard.

Sam stepped to the texas and called "Howdy, Morg. Skipping the country?"

Owen halted and stared up at him, his face blank. "Maybe. Maybe not. It depends." He disappeared from view, Monk Vines traipsing behind him. The gangplank ran in with a clatter, and Sam belled the engineroom.

It was a clear, fair day though the gorge wind fretted the river. Purser's duties would keep Kester busy, which meant that Sam would probably be tied to the wheel all the way down. Without trouble, it would be a run of only three hours, but he was alone in the little house perched atop the texas, attention glued to the channel. He had a continual prickling in his back; he found himself casting quick glances over his shoulder and the deserted spaces behind.

He doubted that the misfire which had caused Nick Cameron's death had panicked Owen into clearing out. So far the man had worked with cool and ruthless courage. Like Sam Arundel, Owen must be patiently plugging away trying to bring the crisis to a conclusion satisfactory to himself. He could do that if he could yet remove Sam from the scene, since those in whom Sam had confided could offer nothing but hearsay evidence.

Yet the *Queen* swung in to Cascades Landing and made fast with nothing disturbing the tranquility of the passage. Her connection, the *Dolly,* would have reached the lower landing an hour earlier, Sam knew, and transferred her passengers to the little mule-drawn train that made the five mile portage. Except for the gorge breeze it was a fair day, and he idled at an open wheelhouse window watching his passengers go ashore to wait the train. His brow knit puzzledly when he saw Owen and Vines among them, lugging their grips.

The portage train pulled in presently and halted at the little waiting station. Sam had come down to the main foredeck, and he went pounding ashore when he saw old Cap Hawthorne alight from the little train, followed by Amy. He didn't know why he should be so glad to see her, since she probably had only been off on a shopping trip to Portland. By the time Sam came up, Morg Owen had greeted the old captain and was talking with him earnestly. A little apart and watching Amy with marked interest was Monk Vines.

Amy watched Sam's approach with an unchanged face. Her eyes centered on the bandage under his blue cap, the dimple peeked at him and vanishd.

"Well, did you have a nice drunk?" she asked.

"Middling," Sam said. Monk Vines was coming up to them; Sam saw that Owen was edging the old captain off in the other direction, getting his back turned this way. Vines still had his grip in one hand, and he had the other shoved into his coat pocket.

"Howdy, Miss Amy," Vines said pleasantly. "We had a idea you'd be getting back today. Arundel, I gotta gun in my pocket, and it's pointed at her pretty stum-

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mick. Take her arm and whisper something nice into her ear. Turn around and start walking up the slope."

Amy's eyes widened, and her cheeks blanched, but she made no sound. Sam swallowed. Still talking earnestly, Morg Owen was walking the captain away from them. None of the scores of passengers drifting about seemed to detect anything unusual about Monk Vines.

"Arundel," Vines warned, his manner still chatty, "what happens here's going to have a lot to do with whether Morg and me have to kite it. If we do, we want to know we fixed you first. Do what I say or you'll live just long enough to see if Miss Amy's really made of sugar."

It was Amy who gave in, turning around with a small toss of the head. Sam followed suit, taking her arm as instructed and walking slowly away from the protection of the crowd. With a similar idle saunter, Vines kept only a few paces behind. A path led up from the landing level onto a narrow flat, behind which rose conifered mountains of the gorge.

"On across," Vines called amiably. "Then head into the woods and strike up the hill."

The grass was thick and tall and wet. They came out upon the old, abandoned wagon portage the emigrants to the Willamette Valley had used a generation before. At Vines' instructions they moved along it until Sam estimated they were half a mile from the steamboat landing.

Then Vines called a halt. "You can turn around and face me. Morg wants to see you, Miss Amy. He'll be along pretty soon. He never cottoned to you much, and he don't like you even that good now."

Sam had no gun, which fact Vines must have divined, for he made no search. He stood spraddle-legged before his captives, his own small gun out in the open now, still lined on Amy to discourage any brash move on Sam's part. And to Sam's surprise, his animosity seemed to be directed mainly to the girl.

"Do we get any kind of an explanation with this?" Sam asked.

"It's up to Morg. I can tell you we never figured to get such a nice chance to pick up the two of you. Figured you'd be a separate job, Arundel, and a mite harder."

Sam reflected on that. So they had aimed to pick Amy up anyhow, a fact that didn't seem to make sense. Then Morg Owen came hurrying up the old trace, apparently having taken leave from the old captain without arousing suspicion. A cold feeling ran up Sam's spine. If Cap Hawthorne inquired for his daughter, probably a dozen people could tell him she had mosied off with the *Queen's* young captain.

Owen also carried his grip; he also regarded the two captives in pleased triumph. His only greeting was a twisted, chilling smile at Amy.

"You been cute in more ways than one, lady," he told her. "All the time Nick Cameron was supposed to be working on you, you were working on him. And Nick got nicked with his own two-sided sword. Did Arundel tell you Nick got hisself killed, last night?"

Sam winced, waiting for the shock to show in her. Though white-cheeked and tense, Amy met Owen's stare with level eyes. "I'm very sorry to hear that," she murmured. "I'd hoped he'd live to hang."

Sam blinked. Noting this, Owen swung his stare Sam's way. "You might as well die happy, Arundel. In each other's arms, if you want. Because you're going to die together. You know why you are, but you don't know how foxy this pretty trick played it on us. I guess you been picking your brains all day wondering what Monk and me're doing down here. Well, we got our money in these bags. We were fixed to light our shuck, or go back to Dalles City and buy her papa out, depending on how it went. I sure never expected to pick you off so easy together."

Sam thought Amy was looking a little proud of herself, even if she was scared. He wondered what in blazes she had been up to, but nobody seemed of a mind to tell him. Then his heart skipped a beat when Owen and Vines looked at each other and Owen nodded.

"Walk 'em off into the brush, you fool," Owen snapped. "You want to leave blood where somebody might find it."

Vines jerked his head. "Up into the timber, you."

Sam turned with great reluctance toward the undergrown fir hugging the trace.

"Tell the man not to get so bossy!" a voice ripped out, straight ahead of him.

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"Vines, you squeeze that trigger and you drop stone cold dead in your tracks. Owen, you put your hands together behind your head. Amy, you kite over here in case I gotta cut loose at them reptiles. Sam, you —!" The voice was Clovis Kester's.

It was Morg Owen who decided to take a long chance with his henchman's life. He swung and bolted for the brush opposite Kester, knowing the old mate would not dare swing his gun off Vines while Vines held his on Amy. Sam lurched toward Amy, his relief drowned in an agony of fear for her. He hit her and knocked her sprawing in the mud in the split second when guns started going off. He fell beside her, between her and Vines, waiting for the rip of lead into his body. Then he looked up. Vines was down in the mud himself, but in a more erratic position, flat on his back and staring upward. Kester wisely had plugged him instantly.

Sam realized Morg Owen had forted above the trace and had done the other shooting, concentrating on Kester since the others were unarmed. As he considered this, Sam was crawling toward the brush, following Amy. For a girl with a long skirt, she was making good time.

It wasn't comfortable being on the same side of the trace with Owen and without a gun. Kester was doing no more shooting, and Sam feared he had been hit. But their situation was slightly less precarious than it had been a few seconds before. Sam whispered, "Wait here," and began to crawl.

He circled, wanting to get behind Owen, hoping the man's interest in Kester would keep him busy. It was suddenly very quiet in the woods; Sam had to detour continually to make his way through the heavy, soaked undergrowth. When he figured he was directly behind his man, Sam headed back. He could only see a short distance, was obliged to prospect each foot of his way. Then he got a glimpse of Owen, below and ahead.

The man was standing behind a tree, neck craned while he stared around it and studied the far side of the trace through an opening. The inattention he gave his rear showed he was not expecting to be slipped up on by an unarmed man. He was hungrily seeking a shot into the brush across the way. The precious bag he had held onto so stubbornly was at his feet.

Sam weighed his chances of coming up behind the man and found them dismal. But there was no way of knowing if Kester was still in the fight. A smart thing, Sam knew, would have been for him and Amy to have pounded it when they had the chance. But he wanted to get his hands on Morg Owen; he didn't want the man to hightail it financed by company money.

Sam moved forward, expecting Owen to whirl and shoot. But a man watching a dangerous blind concealing a man who might likewise shoot is inclined to concentrate on it. Ten paces behind Owen, Sam climbed cautiously to his feet. He sucked a breath and charged. He had almost closed the gap when Owen spun and fired. Sam felt no impact, but something turned him cold and slightly sick. He hit Owen, and they went down together.

Neither made a vocal sound. Twisted desperation was in Owen's heavy face; he wrenched to break his gun arm free from Sam's grip. And something seemed to have drained all the strength out of Sam. Something made Owen's shape dance in his vision. He knew he had been hit, that he was no match for the fellow. Owen must have seen the flowing blood, for he was grinning suddenly. Nausea tugged on Sam's belly like a lump of lead. Owen got himself on top.

All Sam knew after that was that Owen let go of him suddenly in the same second in which there was a loud whack. Owen rolled over, and Sam saw Amy standing with a short length of stick in her hand. She came down with it again as Owen slumped down from stiffened arms.

She was about to deliver another crack when Kester's voice called, "Leave be, there, girl, or we won't have anybody left to lock up!" The mate came charging across the trace.

Owen's bullet had ploughed a little furrow across the heavy muscles crowing Sam's shoulder. It wasn't deep, but from the way Amy took on a man would have thought he had been killed. She insisted on ripping up a white petticoat and applying a compress to the wound before they started back to the steamboat landing. Before Morg Owen came to Kester strapped his hands

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together behind him, using his belt, and he doubled the caution by sitting over the unconscious man with his gun in his hand. Then, when the freighter had revived and could come to a groggy stand, they started down. Sam and Amy carried the two bags.

"Struck me funny," Kester said, "when I see you two starting out for a little walk with Monk Vines trailing behind. Figured I'd better take me one, too, even if the missus wasn't there to enjoy it with me."

At the landing they came upon a scene of complete tranquility, though they roused a little curiosity when they appeared and went aboard the *Queen*. Old Cap Hawthorne was in Sam's cabin, where they marched Morg Owen to confine him. He showed no great surprise.

"Getting too old for such chores, or I'd have followed you, myself," the old captain said. "Thought it was funny Owen should be so interested in tying me up in a conversation. I'd caught a glance of you two going up the slope ahead of Monk Vines. When Owen excused himself and followed, I'd have trailed him if I hadn't seen Kester taking over the job. I could see a gun bulging under his belt, and I didn't have one."

Sam stared at him. "Were you suspicious of them?"

Hawthorne shook his head, grinning. "Blazes no! I knew damned well what kind of skullduggery they'd been up to!"

Morg Owen, slouched in a chair under Kester's careful gun, glared at all of them impartially. Maybe he had a headache, or maybe he was worried, but he had a look of deep apprehension in his eyes.

That reminded Sam of something, and he turned to look at Amy. "What the devil were they talking about up there? What'd you do that scared 'em so? Whatever it was, it nearly got you killed."

AMY looked pleased, and she looked triumphant. "So you figured you were the only smart one in the company, Sam Arundel! Sometimes you make me so mad I could choke you. Did you think I enjoyed letting that ass of a Cameron pay court to me? Oh, you considered yourself so bright that day you pointed out to me that the freight we were losing was all in the luxury class. The kind that cost us plenty and that some unscrupulous dealer would be glad to buy up at a big discount. I saw that with the first batch of claims we received. Once I got to figuring how I'd go about such a caper if I was running it, I began to figure it out. It was patently an inside job."

Cap Hawthorne was grinning. "There's an advantage in being old and pokey, Sam. When she brought that notion to me, I didn't have the gumption to go tearing around getting myself into jams, the way you did. Man my age has got to save his feet by using his head. So I got this notion, and Amy carried it out. The best way to keep Cameron and Owen complacent was to play crazy about Cameron. And for me to play sleepier than I usually am, which is plenty."

"You ain't got a thing on me!" Owen growled. "Cameron, Ney and the rest, they're dead, and mebbe you can prove they had it coming. You can't tie me onto it." But the man didn't look like he really meant that.

"What was the caper?" Sam asked impatiently. His wound was thawing out and hurting now. Morg Owen had been a hard man to jail, and he didn't yet see how it could be done. He had a steamboat to get back to Dalles City.

"Tracer shipments," Hawthorne answered. "That is, shipments we could keep track of. Done most of it by letter, without getting off my pants. Sometimes I think you work too hard at things, Sam. Fixed it with a Portland wholesaler to send through shipments of them luxury items to a fake name in Auburn. Only, I had 'em number the inside of the cases where it wouldn't show easy. Mind you, I didn't know who was doing the dirty work. It could even be you robbing a sleepy old partner, so Amy and me kept it to ourselves. Except she'd keep hinting to Cameron she was sure you were it. And she kept playing mad at you."

"I wasn't playing!" Amy said. "Sometimes I could scratch his eyes out."

"Why, that there's love!" Kester said wonderingly. "Me and the missus fight like blazes most every night. Sort of hones a man's edge."

"Love, fiddlesticks!" Amy said, but she blushed.

Sam gulped, scarcely able to credit all he was learning about her. But, even though

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they were going to jail Morg Owen, they hadn't hung him yet. Sam had worked hard getting this far, and he was very tired.

"So," resumed the old captain, "I fixed it with a big mercantile in Auburn to look out for the numbered cases. They began to show up. The store was getting 'em from Linus Prior. What's more, not a blasted thing shipped to this fictitious name ever even got as far as the Deschutes. I could at least get that far and check."

"All right," Owen snapped. "Prior's in it. And somebody here in Dalles City. There's a lot of people here."

Cap Hawthorne stared at him mildly. "I could at least hobble over to your office, Morg, and I done that just the other day when you went up to Umatilla. Nobody around but a couple of old stablehands, and they were boozing and sleeping it off, likewise enjoying your absence. Found a letter from Prior to you, saying he was paying you too blamed much seeing how easy you were getting the stuff. Wanted you to come up and talk over a new deal. I got that letter in the safe at Dalles City."

"Ah," Sam said. "That's why he decided he had to kill Prior."

Morg Owen swallowed and put a flat palm against his cheek.

Hawthorne stared.

"Did he kill Prior?"

When Sam nodded and told them his side of the story, the old captain grinned. "Then we can hang Owen, instead of jailing him for twenty years. Boy, maybe you've been of some use, after all."

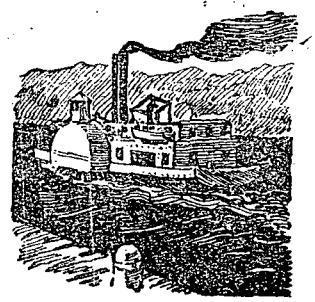
"And the Umatilla sheriff's got a whiskey shipment I found in Prior's warehouse that shows tampered waybills," Sam added. "Figured I'd check with the Portland wholesaler and find out who it'd been really shipped to. Only trouble is, there's no way to identify the lot."

Hawthorne's eyes brightened. "Whiskey? Sheriff up there's got it? That's a worry off my mind, boy. Scared it would get scattered out, and we'd have the devil of a time rounding it up. That's what Amy and me've been to Portland about. Seen that shipment come through. The thieves'd been showing a weakness for likker, but that one wasn't a tracer shipment. Wholesaler hadn't shipped anything to Prior in a coon's age. Had just made a shipment to a outfit in Auburn. We got his sworn statement to that effect. Aimed to hightail it on to Umatilla Landing in hopes of catching him with it on his hands. Got held up a day getting what we wanted, and I was scared we'd never cut it. So it looks like you got in another lick of work there, too."

The little clock on the wall told Sam it was time the *Queen* was standing upstream. He grinned at Owen, whose head seemed to have settled two inches into his shoulders, and went out to the wheelhouse. His shoulder was lame, but he could stand a three hour trick at the wheel, while Kester stood guard over Owen. Then he forgot the shoulder entirely when Amy slipped out and followed him.

She wasn't mad at him now; her eyes were aglow, and the dimple was right out where a man could look at it. "Sam, I didn't want to think you were off on a drunk. Knowing you'd got suspicious yourself, I was worried about you. But Kester made light of your not showing up. Said something about your having more lives than a cat. But I'm glad he switched my mind away from the truth. I'd have died."

The deckhands had run in the gangplank. Sam belled for steam. "Why?" he asked. He didn't need her to tell him, he just wanted to hear it. But her eyes told him before they closed, as his lips came down upon hers.



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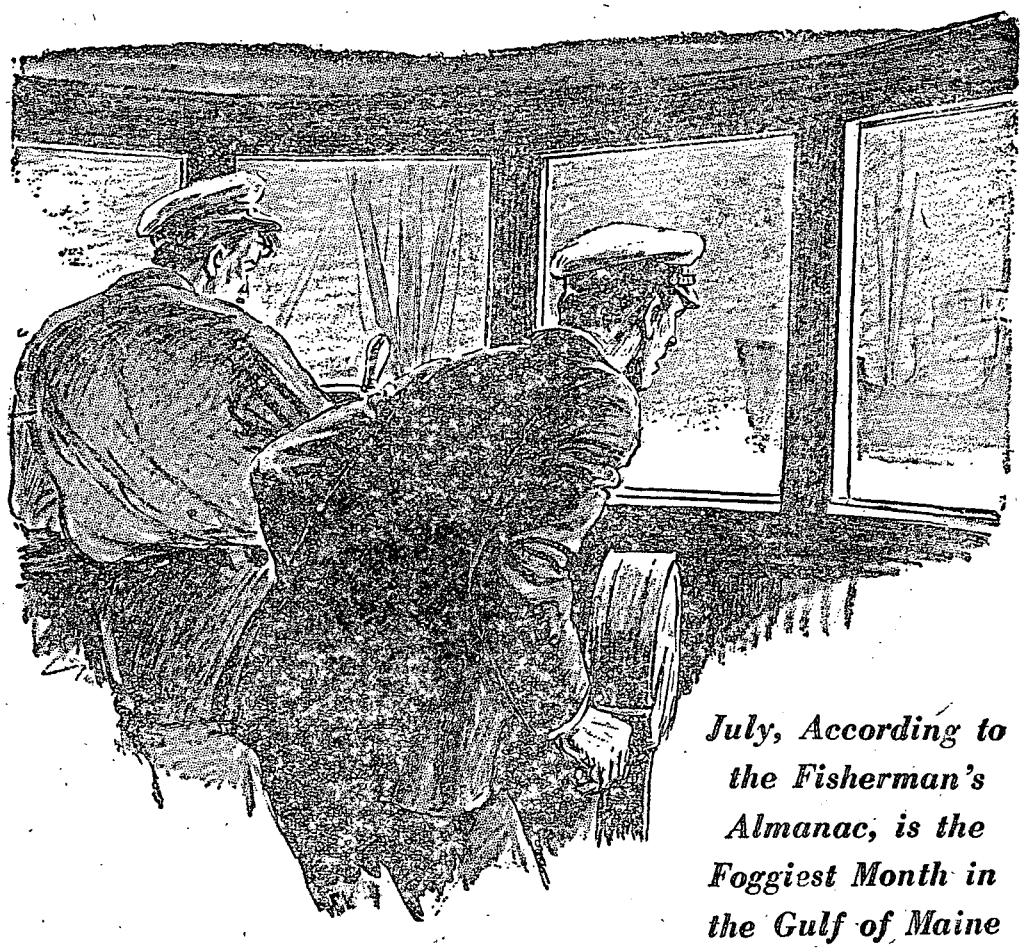

July, According to the Fisherman's Almanac, is the Foggiest Month in the Gulf of Maine

THE SKIPPER WAS CORNERED

By B. E. COOK

THE small bay steamers have sprouted compressed air sirens with the loud, sonorous snort of liners. They shatter the air like slatting blinds when they back out of the dock into the tide. And from somewhere among the wharves occasionally will come an answering shrill which draws the eyes of oldtimers toward the lofty wheat elevators.

Those elevator piers are vacant now, but the shrill cry could be the small tugboat *Ben Hur* going to sea with a Liverpool grain ship to take off her pilot.

And Captain Benjamin Boothby has the tugboat because it is the middle years of the garish twenties. He always thrilled at the chance to get outside of the harbor and always came back in the grip of remorse. Profound regret would engulf him for hours and the wise ones left him to his thoughts. He kept his own counsel.

Resentment intensified his gloom today in harmony with the rain. The waterfront hummed in the aftermath of a local tragedy and Cap'n Ben Boothby, alone in his snug cabin abaft the *Ben Hur's* wheelhouse, was the one person who knew the news behind that news. Policemen might investigate and the press might conjecture, all of them

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nosing for facts and clues, but this solitary young skipper who belonged coastwise in colliers knew precisely what had occurred and why. Also, he knew better than to talk.

Who would have dreamed that a rum runner would come in here after midnight? In a lesser port where curfew still rang on the city's fire signal system at nine? A conscientious rookie cop on a waterfront beat had caught the runner discharging her cargo from Miquelon—or was it St. Pierre? He had vanished like the rum runner.

This noon, guided by sketchy evidence, grapplers had hoisted the rookie's remains from the slime at a pier's end. The legs were bound. The deceased wore his own bracelets. Captain Boothby heard the talk, he recognized the method used to liquidate the copper. Now he moved about restlessly aboard the tugboat in anticipation. "Biff Clarner," he kept muttering, "Biff Clarner."

Because Clarner always followed up his infrequent killings to check local reaction. A criminal, he returned to the scenes of his murders. An outlaw, he showed the blazing streak of cowardice; his fear of publicity, Boothby recalled, harassed the man. Occasionally it got past his I'm-a-man-over-men pose, his affected calm, his conceit. Ben Boothby had detected it but few of Clarner's hardy, less sensitive henchmen probably had. Assuredly it never was exposed to the world at large.

This afternoon the captain gave some thought to the men Clarner had tricked, men like himself whom Clarner had got something on, used them, and then hidden them away from their natural haunts. There he held them by invisible bonds, often in some strategic locale where he employed their eyes and ears—and God help them if they used their tongues. For this was the Prohibition Era. Illicit booze had become big business that framed a "noble experiment."

The captain endeavored to view his own status objectively. He liked the little *Ben Hur*. She paid a living. Until today, he had hoped that Clarner's ever expanding activities would leave him forgotten here, left behind in the surge for power. Clarner had overlooked him so long.

But the vast trek of vacationers to Maine had led Clarner's svelte customers this way and one of his boats had come in. Captain Boothby chafed his palms and cursed the night he had discovered that he was running rum up the coast, along with sixty-five hundred legitimate tons of coal.

After dark he kept eyeing the wheelhouse clock, counting the hours to midnight. Would Clarner arrive for the checkup on the hour? In this drenching downpour?

In late evening he unballed the wrinkled telegram that he should have burned. He deciphered the innocent looking words again and touched a match to them down on the floor. Somebody might be watching the tugboat. True, the message read like a notice of an inbound grain vessel's coming, but local police were furious and the press had headlined the tragedy. That rookie had been popular.

The captain's only hope this evening was that Clarner would ask how much of a stir had resulted, then get out. Or had he an assignment for the skipper whom, by mysterious methods and pull, he had relegated to this quiet harbor? The very idea startled Boothby to his feet. He would not board a rum runner. He would not risk his license further in smuggling.

Ah but Ben Boothby was young. He had come up quickly. His career as a master in steam had only begun. Life looked long and good ahead of him—if only Biff Clarner had forgotten him. If only! And if he should refuse? How many lives could even a big-time outlaw take, depending upon bribed inspectors? The rookie cop's case had hit the news hard. Would revenue men ferret it out? Would Clarner dare to risk another incident yet awhile?

The skipper's gray eyes narrowed. He gripped the spokes of the big steering wheel, there alone in the rain-battered, dark wheelhouse. He peered out through the rain at the float alongside. "I shall stand my ground," he declared. "No more shenanigans."

BIFF CLARNER swished aboard at 2:30. The sleek raincoat rustled despite his caution. His waterproofed hat curled, rakishly defiant of the world in general, yet it managed cleverly to hide his upper face.

The captain's eyes, accustomed to the long, dark hours of waiting, noted the slitted eyelids, the quick glance around, the curled, meager lips and the over-all scorn

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of the surroundings. It was sheer bravado. One fist remained in the coat pocket.

Boothby slid his farther hand to his hip and cursed. He had left his automatic under his pillow. "Well?"

"Hell of a place to get to. Too near the scene."

"We'll talk in my cabin," the captain said. "Four steps down. I'll lead the way." Could he swipe the gun from under the pillow by going first?

Clarner had no intention of risking his hide in so confining a space. Fancy a cop catching him down there! "We'll talk here."

On the settee abaft the helm's half-concealment, they parried words until: "Yeah, 'twas the big story in these newspapers and they've got three of them." The captain would impress this killer with the implied folly of instigating another murder. "It is a railroad terminal, a grain port, and they all say dope comes across the border, maybe some aboard the ships. So plenty federal men—"

"Never mind about the federal men," slatting the water off his hat. He cursed and growled uneasily, "Anyway they didn't get that load."

Boothby had rasped him; he must appear agreeable. "From St. Pierre?"

"Don't ask questions. I might get suspicious."

"Well then, what do you want?"

"You."

Pressure knocked at the captain's temple, opening the hatches of his temper, swimming silver spots before his eyes. His left fist closed defensively, his right stole toward the empty hip pocket. So Clarner really had maneuvered him up here in the little tugboat for a future purpose!

He got to his feet to meet the impending issue squarely. "I'll not run your rum from St. Pierre or anywhere else. Clarner, you've hit the headlines at long last. In a port where the inspectors are smart and persistent as hell!"

"Sit down, you fool. I know all that. It's not so drowsy hereabouts in the summer; that's why I'm here tonight. You. Fancy leaving you in the midst of this—but luck has played with me. It always does." He looked the dark wheelhouse all over to add in speculative mood, "Liked this little hideaway, didn't you?"

"Still do. I make it pay enough."

"You're a liar," Clarner snarled in a quick change of attitude.

True, the captain had made the best of his situation, but Clarner was right. If only the break would come, the chance to explode the career of this racketeer who trapped honest men, who made way with obstructors, whose fundamental urge was power. "What's wanted of me?" he demanded thickly.

Clarner preferred to drone on and tantalizingly. "You're young to be cornered away off here in a harbor tugboat. Of course, some would have gone off the end of a wharf, I mean voluntarily. You got smart." He shoved his handsome face closer: "But not smart enough." He sat back again to muse, "No indeed, I didn't forget you, Boothby."

The captain refused to air his impatience while the build-up of planned suspense mounted around him. His ears rang, his legs tautened and threatened to launch him, his fists itched for the rascal's throat. Only by stern effort did he contain himself and wait it out. Clarner was armed.

"No, sir. How could I forget you? I had it on you from the hour you took the *Delancy* down Hampton Roads with those fifty cases of my West Indies rum in her forepeak. Too bad you took it—"

"I took it! I didn't suspect it was aboard me till I got your radiogram in your fancy code east of Halfway Rock. Me take—smuggling!"

Unmoved, enjoying the reaction, Clarner droned on again. "So you've said before—but not to the Coast Guard or the Treasury dicks, remember. You'd better not, Captain. Then, the next trip to Rock Harbor you ran your ship fast aground on some rocks and you had been racing another collier, which your owners neither knew about nor would have sanctioned at that time? You obeyed my second radiogram to run aground. You didn't dare to refuse me by that time. I could have had certain persons report you for smuggling rum and you couldn't laugh that one off. A rather new master's license, you know, and the real right to hold it yet to be demonstrated—and you a smuggler?

"Well, the dodge worked. The Coast Guard up there worked over the *Delancy* in the fog, you'll recall, and got her off the ledges while my best rum runner delivered

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a whacking big load in Rock Harbor. Plenty grand I made that time."

"I wouldn't know," the captain muttered. He hadn't profited.

"Your rake-off was the right to keep your master's papers. That much you do know, Captain. Watch your damned tongue."

Boothby stirred, but Clarner's right fist still bulged in his raincoat pocket. How much of this gloating recap must be endured? What would he propose this time?

Clarner sighed almost comfortably. "That brings you up to date, doesn't it? Me, I've I've made some important connections meantime. Picked up some important customers and I've got a yen for shares, stock. My business won't last forever, you know, and the shipping business is booming. Dollar a ton to move coal to New England? Oh, I look ahead while you vegetate here.

"So you, Captain Benjamin Boothby, still hold your papers because I—well, I influenced Mr. Blinn against recommending a year's suspension. So he said it was thick fog and possibly excusable but you'd better not continue aboard the colliers."

Boothby could have smashed his face in for thanks.

"This little tugboat, Captain, happens to be his personal property. You respect Mr. Blinn, of course?"

"I'm through there. I'm off the Noisome Creek Mining Company's books. Why rave about that? Get to the point, Clarner."

"On the contrary, Captain, Blinn wants you back now."

The captain stifled his astonishment to respond sarcastically, "Yes, yes, of course. So he sends you as his messenger boy away down here in the rain to tell me all about his deep affection. Don't make me laugh."

"Rather, I'm beating him to it instead. You'll get a letter."

"How delighted I'll be!"

"You'd better." Clarner let the noise of the rain on the windows hammer that one home, then he clinched it with: "Too bad you ran afoul of the Eighteenth Amendment, Captain; too bad you're finnicky that way."

BOOTHBY fumed inwardly, but resistance was futile. Clarner's interest in all this was problematical, but an idea flared up in the captain's brain. He could resume command of the *Delancy* and still refuse to carry liquor. This, in bald fact, was his only chance to get back to sea.

Clarner was droning, "—the *Delancy* aground is what landed you here but the dicks can break you still for running rum. Always remember that."

"Break you, too!" It burst from his lips.

Clarner sprang to his feet, tall and menacing and furious. He seemed to fill the wheelhouse. He leered down over the captain. The rain sounded too loud, the tug chafed uneasily against her float. "Captain Boothby, you've been left to yourself too long. You're not safe. That is why I came myself to warn you in advance: accept Blinn's offer."

At last the captain felt better; he had gotten a rise out of his nemesis and in so doing he had discovered the man's deeper reason for coming. Clarner was afraid of him, afraid of what an ambitious, ordinarily lawful, young man might do to right himself with the world in general. "And if I prefer it here?" he demurred calmly.

"You won't. That's my orders. Obey them or else."

Again the lash curled around the victim; Clarner had him cold and they both knew it. But Boothby couldn't yield completely. Now was the time to make all things plain. "If I go, I'll stand for no more booze aboard my ship. That is final, Clarner."

The racketeer laughed at him.

It cut through what self-respect Boothby still claimed. His temper was fast surmounting his better judgment. He must rid himself of this hellion before he defied the gun in the pocket and paid with his very life. "Very well, I'll go to Blinn. You've got the upper hand." He rose to end it.

Clarner chuckled to the door. "Upper hand? Captain Boothby, I'm the boss!"

THOSE were the halcyon days of King Coal. Oil had yet to prove itself in a big way. The thing to keep constantly in mind was that the collier trade differed from other shipping; colliers carried their owners' own product. And also Boothby had risen rather quickly to command, hence his unnecessary daring in putting the *Delancy's* forward end onto ledges. But she had long since been repaired and paid for it several times over and her young skipper had, despite one

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bungle, demonstrated a talent for getting the most out of both vessel and crews. Now his talent was seriously needed.

Thus and so on. Mr. Blinn unburdened himself to Captain Boothby in the draught of a swinging fan. Then he came to the point. "Ships do not make a practice of racing, Captain. You know that. It costs money in bunkers and repairs; any engineer will tell you. We have no competition to fear in delivery of our Noisome Creek product, but Diamond Vein Mining is after our markets in three downeast ports. All companies have agreed to hold the price to three dollars a ton at the waterside and one dollar a ton for delivery. Do I make myself clear?"

Captain Ben had known it all before he came in.

"Good. Now this: our mutual competition has narrowed down to delivery rate. Those downeast Yankees, failing to break our prices, have resorted to complaints about erratic deliveries. Diamond Vein has begun to soap them with speed. They are using the *Blackstone* for it, a sort of demonstration. We've tried to meet their challenge with our *Delancy* and we have seen her come through a poor second each time. We are on the verge of losing three good coal contracts by it and she is our best vessel."

"Then her skipper—or skippers—have been racing her?" Boothby asked.

"Wait. Here's the point: either we put sixty-five tons of top-grade gas coal at the Rock Harbor wharf ahead of their *Blackstone* or Diamond Vein scoops that contract before we can renew it. Which, in turn, can crowd us out of one at Portland and another at Bangor."

The captain smothered a chuckle, recalling his race with the same *Blackstone*. "But colliers do not race, you said."

Mr. Blinn's eyes narrowed like twin setting moons above his full cheeks. "Captain, I want you to run the *Delancy* downeast one trip just as fast as it is possible without a breakdown. The chief engineer will not let her over-extend herself if I know McCord. She and the *Blackstone* both are nearly loaded at Lambert's Point and Captain Pratt has proved a rough opposition. He has neatly and completely made monkeys of two of my best older skippers by leading them by fair or foul out to sea and holding his lead all the way up the coast, damn him. Now you clinch our Rock Harbor contract for us and we shall forget past errors."

THE *Delancy* got her lines and backed away from the middle berth along the up-tide side of a Lambert's Point pier. Just as the *Blackstone* got her last line aboard. All at once she was backed away from the end berth on the other side. She swung directly across the *Delancy's* right of way. Whistles tooted. The *Blackstone* came right on. Collision was imminent.

Captain Boothby rang for full ahead. His vessel's stern danced a fling on her pounding propeller. White foam poured from under her counters and the other collier backed directly into it. A towboat skipper screamed. Boothby shouted to his Third stationed aft. Rope fenders were hung over the taffrail. The *Blackstone* ground to one of them and rolled it along.

Somebody on her bridge let go a raucous guffaw when the *Delancy's* screw checked her sternway and a sailor hauled aboard the shreds of a rope fender. Then the black-and-white Diamond Vein vessel throbbed into the stream and down the Roads. Into the lead at the very outset.

Captain Boothby again backed from the pier. He saw the other vessel more than halfway to Old Point when he got his straightened out for her march to sea. He had lost the first round despite Mr. Blinn's warning. And lost it to the same Captain Pratt whom he had matched, mile for mile, until the radiogram from Clarner.

Clarner! The captain had clean forgotten the man in the new deal with Blinn. Clarner—and the *Blackstone* forging down-channel to the capes. Clarner and Blinn and coal contracts. The Biff had mentioned buying shares in the business; ten to one he had acquired Noisome Creek stock and now depended on him, Boothby, to make it pay by clinching this race for contracts. Or hadn't he known exactly what Mr. Blinn had wanted the former skipper of the *Delancy* for? If not, his personal interest in the change seemed plain enough to Boothby today: first, he hadn't dared to leave the captain up there any longer; second, he must own stock which would suffer if the *Blackstone's* owners should take coal contracts away from the *Delancy's* owners.

One conclusion from all this eased the

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captain's month's old uneasiness: the lawless Clarner had begun to exercise an interest in a lawful sort of investment.

The *Delancy* at least did not lose distance from her rival throughout the sixty-two-mile leg up to Winterquarter Lightship. The pace was hot. Two lumbering coal hods, both rated at eleven and a half knots in cargo, parted the sea at closer to thirteen knots, vomiting jet smoke pennants and forcing their engines without stint or caution. How long could it continue?

Captain Boothby still mulled the question when the elderly mate came onto the bridge off his watch. The skipper's gray eyes met the china-blue, unhappy stare. "Cap'n, them devils has led us just like this fer three trips east and we never ketch 'em, let alone git ahead of 'em," he complained.

Younger though the skipper was, he entertained no obligation toward an old and perhaps childish mate's wounded pride. What could the man know about the many factors involved, about Blinn's contracts and Clarner's undivulged interest? "So I hear, mister," he responded without enthusiasm.

"When you appeared, Cap'n, I says to myself, 'This'll be diff'rent.' I told their mate so and he sucked me in on it. I laid him fifty bucks even money." The mate squinted out ahead to add reflectively, "Dam' nigh flattened our stern fer us but it got 'em a two-mile lead. Fifty bucks.. He couldn't afford it.

"Mister, it is your money, not mine. This company says colliers don't race at sea." His keen eyes twinkled. "My orders are to put my vessel under the Rock Harbor digger just as soon as possible and I suppose the Chief considers that this is the speed that will do it."

The mate laughed bitterly. "I've oiled and scraped and spread paint and done ev'rything I know to keep this vessel the best one in the trade. But I couldn't maneuver her agin time nor order more r.p.m.'s. Jest you lookit that black-and-white barstid go!"

The skipper remained topside, fully dressed, eating whatever the steward sent above, sleeping only in brief cat naps. His brain hummed to the impelling demand of Blinn's demand, Blinn's order to make time, Blinn's neatly implied threat. What measures would the man take about the month's-old incident on the rocks if the *Blackstone* should dock first? What would Clarner do about the failure? And he had presumed that he might shake off Clarner's hold over him by returning to the *Delancy!*

HALFWAY up the two-ninety-mile run for off Gay Head, he sent for the Chief. McCord proved to be a good listener, this trip. What could be done about overtaking the *Blackstone?* He must have observed the skipper's anxiety, must have seen that it amounted to somewhat more than the mere pride of command, yet he met the gray-eyed earnestness with the professional objectivity so frequently found among the men who have to do the repairing afterwards. "This one wasn't designed to race," he observed.

"Always we keep within two or three miles of her, though, Chief. I've no more liking for speed than you have, but my orders are to get to the Rock Harbor coal wharf just as fast as possible and that vessel leading us has the same orders. Which makes it a race whether we like it or not. Chief, considerable is at stake, this trip. What's the answer below aft, boilers, engine, weak tailshaft?"

McCord had one eye on the old mate in the wheelhouse window and his big ears seemed to reach out for the conversation. "Cap'n, while you've been gone the Diamond Vein people drydocked the *Blackstone* for seven weeks. Gave her new boiler sections for better pressure, went through her engine and installed a brand-new big condenser. They saw this fight coming up while Blinn boasted his *Delancy* was the best collier on the coast.

"The *Blackstone* can just about match us in a go nowadays, so all she has been doing is beat us to sea and hold her lead all the way east. That few hot minutes' advantage she keeps takes her across Rock Harbor out front. Once he gets in by the breakwater first, the wharf is his."

"I know. I should. Can't you crowd on steam enough this side of Gay Head for us to beat him into the Vinyard? If we could lead him through it, he'd have to follow in single file over the shoals and from there on we'd have the best bid for it."

McCord rose heavily off the dodger. "We're gauging five pounds and more too high as 'tis. We could, if we had to, resort

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to direct feeding but they'd do the same. We tried that."

"Your boilers and so on all the way out to the screw could take it?"

"You're the skipper. If something snaps, we lie like a dead duck making repairs."

"Hell, man, what else is there?"

"Oh, we'll run afoul of fog off Maine. Instead of slowing down for it to six knots we might shove right through it without Cap'n Pratt seeing us. No traffic down that way except a lobsterman or two maybe."

So the Chief had laid out his own race? Captain Boothby saw in it the dulling effects of having trailed the *Blackstone* too many times. After months in that quiet harbor aboard a sleepy tugboat, this psychology plus Blinn's appeal plus Clarner's invisible hand —they all combined to combat McCord's lethargy.

In the moonless night below Block Island, clear of the lanes to New York, he dimmed the *Delancy's* lights. He ordered the Chief to resort to direct feed on all three. It came abruptly, angrily. The collier shook from deck to her topmast heads. She rustled a deeper bow wave. Her wake broadened and whitened under the scanty sprinkle of bluish stars.

Three torrid hours like that and Southeast End on Block Island blurred out of the haze in a yellow glow. Gay Head appeared. The *Blackstone* had grown larger, her lights brighter. Her belch of smoke placed her definitely at the starboard of the *Delancy's* course now as it climbed against the dark sky and reached away into the northeast ahead of the procession.

Just why she had not speeded up to meet the challenge puzzled Boothby. McCord had declared that she always did. The skipper drove the *Delancy* on. Off No Man's Land the larger swells off the shoal rolled the *Blackstone*. Boothby's Third noted the first roll and timed the *Delancy* to her first, gauging thus the distance, roughly, between the pair.

Meantime the wheelhouse creaked in the strain, wainscotting crackled, she pounded aft. On she went, gaining all the while. Off Gay Head buoy, she came abreast of the Diamond Vein vessel, heaving a lusty bow wave at her, hustling on around to pass her on the outside of the turn by Nashuena for the course up the Vinyard.

The buoy clanged in the disturbed quiet of the night sea. Then something happened. The *Blackstone* opened up. Being on the inside of the turn, she cashed in on her advantage and sped away in a burst of foam.

When both vessels straightened on the Vinyard course, Captain Boothby was staring at the glistening lather where it spurted up against the black counters and inched away, always gaining on his collier. He clenched his fists and ran to the mouthpiece of the tube to the engine room. "This is it," he cried. "We shall decide the race right here. Give her the works!"

The *Delancy* rumbled and groaned under her sixty-five hundred tons of coal. Somehow, the engineers got a few more r.p.m.'s out of her boilers. At ninety-six she was gaining. After long minutes at ninety-eight she crawled up where her bow stood off the *Blackstone's* afterhouse. Then it came off the long open deck.

SOFT, lulling fragrance came away from the land. A peaceful night silence closed over the struggle. But deep inside those plowing vessels, furnaces roared, crossrods shot downward viciously under spurts of escaping steam, and journals swished down into nasty water. Tension quivered throughout their hulls.

For this was the climax. So the skipper told himself and he gloried in the fight after so long sequestered in a sleepy harbor. He had chosen to win the long struggle early, miles before passing Highland Light, many more miles before the long, foggy run off the Maine coast. Get the lead here and keep it when both vessels disappeared in the fog and neither could keep tabs on the other.

So he planned it, so he believed as his bow reached just ahead of the other ship's wheelhouse. But the wily Captain Pratt had one more trick to play and he played it in the narrowest part of the Vinyard. Without warning, he crowded the *Blackstone* into a *terrific* spurt. He risked the strength of even her improved boilers. But he, too, had received his orders and he dared not yield any more of the advantage he was losing.

Just as the *Delancy* stood directly abeam, Captain Pratt seized upon two neat advantages which luck and geography had given him. He had the other ship on his port side and he stood to run close to a shoal which

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lay off the Vinyard. The silence was suddenly shattered by rapid, curt, startling toots off his whistle—the danger signal. At the same time, he hauled the *Blackstone* to port and directly at the *Delancy*. Rules of navigation required that the ship with another one too close on her port side in a narrow channel had the right of way to proceed ahead in single file.

Captain Boothby stiffened at the unexpected whistle. "Hell, he's got three lengths' clearway of that shoal," he cried. A mate in the starboard wing let go a wild yell. The bow lookout screamed and ran for safety.

Boothby did the only thing possible. He whipped the telegraph levers down and ordered hard left on the helm.

For the second time in this struggle, he avoided serious collision. The *Blackstone* maintained her utmost speed and went on into the lead, all over again. The *Delancy* resumed her speed and swung back onto the course. She had lost the bid to go first over the shoals.

Captain Boothby did his cursing in an undertone while his mates vented their anger loud enough to be heard down on deck. He did not see, of course, the lone figure who had watched the affair from below the bridge. It vanished when the issue was decided.

The skipper had not left the bridge or wheelhouse since quitting the dock. Tonight it looked as though he wouldn't go below for rest or meals until the end of what now became a bitter battle between two cammanders. Not by any means had Ben Boothby given up the contest. Alreaay he was planning for another attempt to beat Pratt to that distant wharf.

But the old mate considered the match over with. "Cap'n, you ain't ett a decent meal nor stretched onto yer bed once since we left the dock." Getting no rise out of the pondering skipper with that commiseration, he moaned, "Fifty bucks I lost." To the Second in a window he confided sadly, "I thought Cap'n Boothby could outmaneuver that Pratt anytime. I thought!"

JULY, according to the Fishermen's Almanac, is the foggiest month in the Gulf of Maine. August isn't much better. It came this time for the two colliers in a lazy haze off Agamenticus. The Portland Lightship, for them, became only the tip ends of her mastheads above a gray blanket.

Captain Boothby now could barely make out the upper stack and mastheads of the *Blackstone* and he estimated that they were nearly three miles ahead of him, nearly a mile to the eastward. He liked that eastward distance as he went into the thick of it, for once he lost his rival and she lost him to view, he could resort to the Chief's plan and surely that reluctant individual couldn't drag his professional heels against his own suggestion.

A mess boy come above with another mess of dry sandwiches. The Old Man went into the wheelhouse and brewed fresh coffee for himself and came outside again to find McCord waiting to yam. "We're not licked yet," Boothby assured him in stubborn defiance at the outset.

While he burned his tongue with the coffee, McCord remarked comfortably, "I am a fatalist. What is, it just is. You saw how far Pratt will go to keep all comers astern of him. You also saw the speed he could get out of that black devil when we forced his hand in the Vinyard. What the hell? Blinn should have spent some money on this one."

Between munches the skipper asked, "Did you recommend boiler overhaul?"

"Me? To race this collier? What the merry hell has it come to? We're not saving the Noisome Creek Coal Company's blasted life!"

The captain recalled Blinn's earnest talk, his former faith in this vessel. He felt poignantly the man's faith in him to checkmate Diamond Valley's fierce bid for Noisome Creek business down east. And there was Clarner, somewhere in the background but with a definite reason for his interest in seeing Boothby in this fight and no doubt about it.

He thought also about his own future. If he should fail and Clarner got nasty, it might conceivably involve his very life, damn the rat! He set the dishes inside and came out to face the Chief squarely. "McCord, there's much more to this go than appears on the surface. A man of your long experience needs no reminder that as master of this vessel I'm accountable to nobody aboard her for what I do or have to do with her," he said evenly.

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McCord smiled tolerantly. "Oh, no? You are a concentrator, Cap'n; haven't left this bridge since we sailed, have you?"

"No. And I still aim to place my open hatches first under the digger on that Rock Harbor wharf."

McCord stirred lazily to watch the *Blackstone's* smoke pennant rising off the low fog in which her stack and mastheads had vanished. "Fog's piling deep now," he remarked irrelevantly, "and you haven't been below."

What if he hadn't? The skipper didn't propose to be drawn off his subject. "Chief, when that vessel completely disappears, he can't see us either. I shall call for another shot of speed despite the blind going. Give it to her hot. Let her have it. As you said below Gay Head, our chance lies up here."

Chief McCord lurched to a companion stairway in the manner of one who has been reminded by authority of authority. He would drive the engine when the order came to do so. But he also assumed the air of one in the know; he seemed in going to glance over one shoulder covertly, illustrating the old gag that there are times when everybody but the skipper knows what makes aboard the ship.

Boothby was not blind, he could read men, he caught the implication. He had refrained from sounding the Chief. Whatever was on the man's mind, it had nothing to do with his race to port. So he decided promptly and he saw that the fog had completely taken over in a hushed silence.

The siren spluttered condensation and bellowed. That was all right for the moment; let the *Blackstone* hear these first bawls and rest assured that she had her foe well astern as the mull closed in over them.

The aging First came above for his late afternoon trick, noted the scrap log, sighed at the fog and went out beside the skipper. Together they heard Monhegan's lusty snort away to port. They estimated their distance off and the skipper remarked, "Still resigned to losing fifty bucks, mister?"

"What? Oh. I was thinkin' 'bout something else. Didn't expect to find you up here, thought you was in yer cabin when I come past."

"Oh."

"Could 'ave sworn you was." He went into the starboard wing to stare into the mist and listen for fishermen's horns.

In my cabin, thought Boothby. Months ago he had rather longed for that cabin again and here he was avoiding it like a plague. Not even a change of clothing since coming aboard, since glimpsing that other vessel across the pier and heaving his bag onto the bed to hurry outside. Well, he'd go below when—just when with fog on his hands and a dangerous attempt at speeding impending?

He felt that Monhegan's horn had sounded a bit too far to the westward, the *Delancy* must haul in, take advantage of it to stand as far from the *Blackstone* as safe when she thundered into that sprint and quit blowing her siren. Let the other skipper look where she was not in case he got curious—and Pratt had a very long nose, he recalled.

The moment arrived. He stationed mates in both wings, a double lookout on the bow, the First directly before the wheelhouse. He whistled down the tube to Chief McCord for top speed. He waited.

The change did not come promptly. It reminded him of the Chief's reluctance to push his engine. He whistled up the Chief again and said, "I ordered speed. I briefed you for this hours ago, now let's have it."

That brought a storm of oaths, outraged pride, angry opinions and more. The *Delancy* took off with a bang. She bored, she rooted into the sea, she plowed. She hove a furious froth astern and the skipper trigged the whistle cord against unwitting use. No bawling into the fog would appraise Captain Pratt of her whereabouts. Let him creep along at half-speed while the *Delancy* took to her heels and escaped him while she could.

The old mate had a gift for drawing attention to himself. Boothby looked at him now, braced against the house, his long, hooked nose dripping fog, his mouth agape. "Mister, you look scared," he said with a laugh.

"I vow I am. We don't need no siren blowin', goin' this way, Cap'n. Gawdsake, we can be heard a mile in all directions!"

True, the *Delancy's* thundering power and rushing waves did make a stir in the blanketed stillness, but they all heard the

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Matinicus Rock horn bleat, they all cried out in unison. For it came close aboard.

Boothby didn't bat an eye about it; he liked the ship's position close in. He hauled her off a quarter point. "That's the way the oldtime schooner men picked it up," he remarked in the mate's excited face. "Now, mister, we shall be on the inside turn when he both round into the passage for the harbor."

There were, in fact, two ways into that harbor from the open sea among the dangerous islands, ledges and projecting rocks which strewed the coast; but the uneasy old fellow knew which he had meant. Only in fine weather had the former schooner masters risked it through that narrow, tortuous channel they called The Gut. Only an occasional foolhardy one ventured in that way after dark, let alone in thick weather.

The skipper repeated what he had said as an order. The mate, in turn, repeated it for checking and the helm came over a few spokes. "Hold her right there till you see that purple and black peaked rock come under the fog," Boothby specified, "then haul out half a point. Man, you know this course, you used to lobster fish off here, what? Nothing to the north'ard."

He had decided to run below briefly for a change of clothes. Instead he paced the wheelhouse, anxious and tense. This was his final bid for success, running thirteen knot speed in the fog and no siren. He untrigged the whistle cord; it might have to be used too suddenly for that device. Meanwhile, he remembered that Mr. Blinn had promised to forgive the "accident" if. The IF looked mountainous today, for how could he know that Pratt wasn't up to the same tricks? Nobody had heard his siren for long minutes. Where was the *Blackstone?*

And Clarner had not revealed his hand in this affair when it would have been more like him to send one of those innocent looking radiograms. Boothby didn't want any such word from the racketeer, but suppose he should lose this race? Biff Clarner most certainly would apply the screws. "Of course, you could have gone off the wharf—voluntarily," he had remarked, something like that.

His brain throbbed. Twice Cap'n Pratt had bested him, now this or nothing. Blinn, Clarner, the ancient mate's fifty dollar bet, the Chief's attitude, they all piled into his crowded brain. The wheelhouse abruptly became for him a prison, yet he had no desire to run out. But he did have to clear his head and the only apparent chance to do it lay in a brief change. He recalled the mate's notion that he had seen or heard him in his cabin. He would go down there now, leave here only long enough to grab some clean clothes. The run down the inside stairway and up again would draw the blood out of his head.

So down he went. He hurried along the thwartship passage to the starboard side. He opened his cabin door— There sat Biff Clarner!

Nothing ruffled that scoundrel nor did this interruption. Indeed, he very plainly enjoyed the dismay on his victim's face. He sat at the little desk and while half-turned from a game of solitaire he held one card suspended to coldly remark, "So far you've done splendidly."

Waves of uncertainty and ugly surprise tingled up the captain's spine. "How in hell did you get aboard?"

"Before you. In the dark."

"How have you kept it from me and eaten for three days?" While talking, Boothby remembered his plight aboard the *Ben Hur.* As Clarner's head turned away again to place the suspended card, the skipper's hand felt of his hip to be sure, then he went for his traveling bag and clothes.

The click of its catch checked the card game. Clarner turned on the swivel chair slowly, suspiciously. Before he could open his mouth, the captain heard a loud chorus of voices coming down into the thwartship passage. Trouble! Up he jumped.

CLARNER sprang between him and the door. "This is why I am here," he snarled in evident triumph. "The *Blackstone* is crowding you ashore, you fool. You are to lose this race."

Clarner's right hand stole to his left armpit. Before it quite arrived, Boothby grabbed it. At the same instant he launched a wild blow that rocked Clarner's head away back, sagged his knees and left him falling while the skipper ran headlong to save his vessel.

His head rose out of the stair well just in time to see the *Blackstone* bearing in on the *Delancy* exactly as she had done in the

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Vinyard. Crash or no crash, Ben Boothby would not haul aside; not this time with bare rocks lapping his vessel's waves close under her very guard. "Hold your course!" he shouted to the helmsman. He rang down the engine.

He ran outside and saw Pratt on the *Blackstone's* bridge staring earnestly under the *Delancy's* stern. He must have been looking for the stopping of the screw for when the water back there quieted, he turned to his mates, threw up both hands in a signal. He had accomplished as much as he dared; he had cut the headway of his rival and thus assured himself of the lead.

Boothby did not watch the *Blackstone* go on this time. No, his eyes were studying the rocks under the port side. The mate came over to see and Boothby said calmly, "Mister, we have reached the point where it is to be everything or nothing."

"Huh? Sir?"

"We are going through The Gut, the shortcut to the harbor. See that low ledge coming out? It's just about the end of low water slack here. When that comes by the third hatch—yes, exactly there, haul us around to north a half east. We're going in!"

The mate pressed one hand to his stomach. His two long front teeth came all the way into view as he turned to obey. Up The Gut. Thick o' fog. Awful. "We draw twenty-six—seven foot aft," he gasped.

"We'll draw one hell of a lot more if you're not careful," came the quick warning. "Ring up full ahead. Lively."

He warned the Chief down the tube. He put mates and lookouts on their toes. A timbered shore came out under the fog at his left. He made a sign and the mate, rather than trust the helm to a sailor, took over. He gave it one turn. Another sign brought it back, the telltale amidship. The *Delancy* rammed on as though she had the whole Atlantic at either side.

Now the raucous noise of her echoed off something on the other hand. The skipper went into the starboard wing, leaned over, listened to it, came up and waved the Mate a signal. A high pair of rocks took shape. The hull just cleared the nearer one. Her wave slapped up its grim side and on she went.

"Eighth of a mile clear going now," Boothby announced, but nobody responded.

Presently he felt, rather than heard or saw, something more than even the fog-bound rocks and shores. He had made a serious error of omission in his cabin. He had dropped Clarner, but in his haste to go above he had not stopped to get the racketeer's gun! Now was the time to do that—

"Point of land coming dead ahead!" one of the lookouts shouted.

Currier Island. Boothby ordered right wheel. He couldn't leave here for anything. He might have to shoot it out with Clarner later, win the race maybe, then beat a fast man to the draw or go down. His stomach knotted, his fists gripped the rail. He was defying Biff Clarner. The full realization of it gripped him hard—and his eyes identified kelp shifting restlessly on the tide ahead, over the port bow. Then a shelving ledge showed beyond it.

The bow swung cautiously between this threat and a sunken ledge coming out. He didn't have to turn from his meticulous task, however; the mate knew every foot of this Gut and he put the *Delancy* through that strait-jacket narrows with inches to spare on either side. Boothby remembered one early morning with his father right on this spot with ninety-three lobsters in the midst of the shedder season. Was his dad high!

The collier's rush hove water away up the sunken ledge where it smashed on a shore, then she was running headlong into "the crooked stretch." Boothby's fists took a new grip on the dodger. His stomach tagged something hard inside him. "Starb'd a hair, we're going in, mister . . . steady." A long point reached out under the gray for the vessel. On the other side a clump of firs stood defiantly at the waters' edge. It looked too narrow between them in the false light, but between them she must go or else.

"Slow down, Cap'n?"

"Damned if I will. We'd lose the time we've already made. Port a quarter point. Ease her—e-e-ease that helm!"

The bow stormed in, passed firs and point of low land and a rocky wall, a green-black stand of timber. Gulls screamed startlingly. The ship's unusual noise became extraordinary, deafening. Her waves slashed and slopped and climbed where trees received them in the darkness underneath low bows.

"Now for Crane Island to port," he said.

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"Black as the night off there and deep." He leaned over the dodger. "On the bow," he called.

"One big white rock coming on the port bow. See it?"

They did and none too soon. The *Delancy* poured herself away from it, hove her stern so close to it that somebody yelled from aft and the unseen trees on both sides bandied the echoes through her upperworks in a succession of voices.

Still that something he had felt, that error in his cabin, haunted him. Just as soon as possible he would return below, get there before Clarner fully regained his poise—a long gravel spit poked into sight. Now! thought he. I have four minutes on this course—

His head set tight. He did not move a muscle. Oh, he heard only the creak of the wheelhouse woodwork, only the loud swish of the bow waves. But he felt a tingled something. Then out the tail of one eye he saw the mate in one wing look behind him and his eyes stared. He felt something really tangible, too. It was hot breath on the back of his neck. That solved the mystery. That was it.

Here he stood with not an instant to give the racketeer and Clarner had him cold. The inevitable hour had arrived at long last, away down here in The Gut, hundreds of miles from the tumultuous haunts of Biff Clarner in lonely fog among hundreds of dangers for the speeding ship.

Clarner was armed! Of course. Presently the gun would press against his back and a controlled voice behind his ear would say, "Onto the rocks or I'll—" Boothby took the fatal chance. He faced around like the eye-deceiving curl of a whip lash. His nose struck Clarner's but his eyes managed to catch the bulge of a fist in a pocket. At the same instant Clarner felt the live end of an automatic to his belly. It registered on his bleak features and the fist in his right pocket moved ever so slightly.

It was the automatic that spoke. The skipper called to the Second while Clarner's arm was sagging. He jerked the hand out into sight and the weapon clattered to the bridge canvas. "Send for a new heaving line and do this man up handsomely, then lash him onto my bed to stay," he ordered the amazed Second.

THE flurry inside the wheelhouse had ended. Boothby still heard the imagined echo of the Second's fist to Clarner's jaw and the slam against the wainscoting as he shouted, "Starboard—right wheel." He drove the *Delancy* into the final stretch, the last half-mile of The Gut. The terrific ordeal through the narrow, tortuous passage was nearly over with.

Then she was into the open. Not one r. p. m. had she yielded, yet he had managed to take her through without a scratch. But the time had come to cash in on the minutes gained. He drove her just as fast as the Chief could crowd on steam, raced her from the inner end of The Gut for Rock Harbor. He picked up the delorous toll of the bell on the breakwater. Looked into the fog and tried his best to hear a whistle somewhere ahead, astern, anywhere that might indicate the *Blackstone* coming in from the east or leading him into the harbor.

Not a sound.

He ran the *Delancy* into the fogbound harbor like a yacht with a hospital emergency case aboard. The fog scaled off the port's small waterfront and there sat a flock of squawking gulls on the end of the coal wharf. No *Blackstone!*

Immediately he peered astern into the gloomy gray and the mists took shape in black and white. It was the *Blackstone's* bow, her bridge. She had slowed down, defeated by eleven minutes. Now she drifted while Pratt got his bearings for seeking a suitable spot in which to anchor.

Boothby did not trust him yet, not after what had come from his tricky brain on the fierce run up the coast. Pratt could conceivably play possum again and come ramming in for the berth under the digger. So the skipper got his bow to the wharf, sent a swing line ashore. It was scarcely secured before reversed screw drew her stern in where a line could be cast.

Just as that second line swished in an arc and uncoiled toward a spiling, the unmistakable clatter of chain racing out a hawsepipe came out of the fog. The *Blackstone* had definitely gone to anchor and Captain Ben Boothby hove a deep, eloquent sigh. He had won. He had met Blim's challenge.

But by the same token he had crossed up Biff Clarner and that was another matter.

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Down in his cabin, he sized up the lashings the Second had made and they were more than sufficient. He took Clarner's measure and came up with what he had anticipated; the racketeer chose to treat all this as temporary. His turn would come—and how! Without raising his voice or batting an eye, Clarner said, "You damned upstart, you've done it. You're marked for curtains." He turned his face away, glancing down at the blood on his bandaged fist. "Got your papers too quick, wet behind the ears, playing the medieval knight."

"Strange times we live in when an outlaw can put a gun to a cap'n's back on his own bridge," Boothby reminded him, peering out the open porthole up the coal wharf for two anticipated strangers now due.

Clarner's voice was menacing. "So you kept the *Blackstone* from her wharf. I happen to hold Diamond Vein shares in that boat, damn you. Where is she?"

"Anchored—and more."

Clarner refused to take the bait. "Ah, yes, the rookie cop. But he wore his own bracelets. Hm, that is a detail to bear in mind."

The skipper almost grinned at him. "You lack new ideas, Clarner. I'll suggest a couple."

Out the porthole he saw two strangers coming and a huge load seemed to rise off his shoulders and he felt immeasurably tired and dirty and actually hungry. "Clarner, I made a clean breast of things to Mr. Blinn. I also contacted the Coast Guard. Your Uncle Sam is preparing a place for you."

Clarner bluffed a defiant laugh of scorn.

"I might add that a revenue cutter's boarding party has a boat 'longside the *Blackstone* out there at anchor."

Biff Clarner's face drained to a chalky gray.

MURDER—

—A retired State Trooper might take a hand in solving that . . . . . .

WITCHCRAFT—

—A weird phenomenon to come across at an American summer resort . . . . . .

"THE WITCH IS DEAD"

A long novelette in our next issue by

HERMAN PETERSEN

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It Ain't What It's Cracked Up to Be—Bein' a Law Officer

THE ESSENTIAL THING

By GENE VAN

"I SHORE hope yuh know what yo're doin'," sighed Dug Evans as he shifted slightly in the saddle and looked at his pardner who was riding beside him down the dusty road.

"I do," grunted Smoky Smith. "Twenty dollars is twenty dollars, Duggie. An' as long as we haven't any detectin' business on hand, we might just as well drop into San Felipe so I can collect that loan I made Goose Martin."

"Mebbe he ain't there," said Dug.

"Oh, he's there, all right," nodded Smoky. "The stage driver said that he was. I ain't seen Goose for five years, but he'll know me."

"Mebbe he won't," sighed Dug. "Especially if he owes yuh twenty dollars. Money makes people kinda forget."

"We'll see," said Smoky. "Anyway, we haven't anythin' special to do. We might as well look over San Felipe as long as we're down this way."

Smoky Smith was a tall, lean cowboy with a tanned face, devil-may-care expression in his eyes, and a half-smile on his lips. His shirt, overalls, boots and battered sombrero were typical of the cowboy. His worn cartridge belt molded his slim waist and his Colt was swinging freely at his right thigh in an old holster.

Dug Evans was short, heavy set, with a moon-like face, pug nose, large blue eyes and a broad mouth. His clothes were the same as Smoky's.

Tired of punching cows for forty a month, Smoky decided that they should turn their talents to detective work, so he put pressure to bear on his brother-in-law, Jimmy Holton, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, and as a result, they became range detectives. Neither man knew just what to do, but they blundered upon answers to many of their cases. Right now they were between problems.

"Shore a pretty country," observed Smoky. "Seems nice not havin' to ride into trouble."

"Yeah," drawled Dug. "I won't know how to act, not watchin' for a bullet in the back. C'mon, Smoky, I'm gettin' hungry."

As they started their horses into a gallop down the dusty road, a shot rang out ahead of them. They pulled up on their reins, rid-

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ing high in the saddle, seeking the reason for the shooting. The road swung around a sharp bend.

Smoky jerked sharply up on his reins, and Dug's horse bumped into him before he could bring it to a halt beside Smoky.

Wham! A bullet whistled near Smoky's head, causing him to duck low in the saddle. Dug slipped free from his horse and landed on his hands and knees beside the road as another shot rang out. Smoky turned his horse, and he saw the man who was doing the shooting. The man lifted the rifle and fired once more, but Smoky had shaken himself from the saddle and landed beside Dug, who was clawing at his six-shooter.

"Didja see him?" asked Dug eagerly.

"Yeah," replied Smoky, as he drew his gun. By the time the frightened horses stopped milling in the dust, the man was gone. They got to their feet and looked around, but no one was in sight.

"What do yuh mean—not havin' to watch for bullets?" grunted Smoky as he holstered his gun and grabbed the reins of his horse.

"I'm wrong," sighed Dug. "But why shoot at us? We never been down here before—unless it was yore friend, Smoky. Mebbe he didn't want to pay yuh that twenty bucks."

"Aw-w-w-w, it wasn't Goose," snorted Smoky as he swung into the saddle. "Remember, he shot at somethin' before we showed up."

"Uh-huh," nodded Dug as they started along the road, their eyes peeled for trouble.

THEY had ridden down around another bend in the road when they drew rein again. Sprawled in the center of the road was the figure of a man, his face buried in the dust. Smoky and Dug sat in their saddles and looked at the body, then at themselves.

"This is what happened on that first shot," said Smoky.

"Is he dead?"

"I dunno," replied Smoky. "Shore looks like it."

"What are we goin' to do?" asked Dug. "Mebbe you'd better take a look at him."

"Me?"

"Yeah, who else? I stay clear o' dead men."

Smoky sighed deeply, swung down from his horse and moved carefully toward the body. Cautiously, Smoky kneeled beside the body and tried to see the face. The man was middle-aged, but a stranger to Smoky. He moved the man's outstretched left arm and started to lift the body when he saw a five-pointed star on the left side of the dead man's shirt. Smoky dropped the arm back in place and straightened up.

"What's the matter, Smoky?" asked Dug.

"It—it's a sheriff," he replied softly.

"Gosh," grunted Dug as he dismounted, but he kept his distance from the body. "What'll we do, Smoky?"

"I dunno," grunted Smoky. "We always report a killin' to the sheriff—an' here he is—dead!"

"That kinda complicates things," sighed Dug.

"Yeah, I reckon it does," agreed Smoky. He stopped and looked down the winding road. "Sounds like somethin' comin'."

They stood there as the sound of horses' hooves and the creaking of a wagon grew louder. Presently a stage came rocking around one of the bends, four horses traveling fast. The boys jumped to one side of the road, waving their arms frantically.

There were two men on the driver's seat; one was holding the reins while the other was fingering a shotgun. They drew the stage to a halt at the side of the road, barely avoiding the body.

"What's the matter?" asked the man with the gun.

"Dead man," replied Smoky as he eyed the speaker. It was Goose Martin. Smoky started to say something, but the man leaped off the seat and hurried to the body.

"My Gawd—it's Pete Grant!" he exclaimed as he knelt beside the body. "Hank—c'mon, we've got to get him back to town!"

"He's dead—yuh can't help him none," said Smoky as he moved in beside Goose Martin.

The tall, lean, freckled-faced man looked up at Smoky. "How did it happen?"

"We dunno," replied Smoky. "We just found him like that—after the feller who shot him took three shots at us."

"That's so, eh?" grunted Martin without the slightest indication of recognition. He turned to the wiry old stage driver and said, "I told him he was a fool tryin' to make

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peace with Rickey Kent. Now jist look what happened to him!"

Goose and the stage driver picked up the limp body and Smoky opened the stage door. They placed the body inside, then climbed up on the driver's seat without another word. Dug and Smoky watched as the stage swung around and headed back toward San Felipe.

"That was yore friend, eh?" queried Dug. "He wore a deputy's badge."

"Uh-huh," nodded Smoky, "but I reckon he was so excited at seein' the sheriff's body that he didn't know just what to do."

"Anyway, he didn't question us," sighed Dug. "Mebbe we'd better turn around an' head back before somethin' real bad might happen to us."

"Aw-w-w-w-w, Duggie," snorted Smoky. "Nothin' more is goin' to happen—an' besides, I need that twenty."

THE death of Sheriff Peter Grant caused all of San Felipe to awake out of their afternoon siesta. Word spread fast and people gathered on the main street. Grant was well liked and respected, and his death was a blow to everyone, especially his daughter, Mary, who had been on the main street when the stage returned.

Goose Martin, beside himself with excitement, turned the shotgun messenger job over to another man before he talked with Mary, who seemed to control herself very well.

"It's terrible," admitted Goose, "I dunno what I'm goin' to do."

"You—you'll be sheriff now," said Mary Grant, tears in her blue eyes. "You—you'll have to get the—the man who shot him."

"Yeah, I reckon I will," nodded Goose. "Gosh, mebbe I'd better get busy. See yuh later, Mary."

The deputy left the doctor's small house, ran up the street to the livery stable, secured his horse, and rode out of town at a gallop, passing Smoky Smith and Dug Evans at the edge of San Felipe, but he never slackened his speed as he disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"That feller's in a hurry," said Dug.

"Mebbe catchin' a train," remarked Smoky.

"There's no train around here," snorted Dug. "Well, at last we found San Felipe. Now for a good steak an' all that goes with it."

They left their horses at the livery stable, then sought out a restaurant where they ordered their meal. While they were eating, a short, heavy-set man dressed in a gray suit came in, looked at them, and came over to their table.

"I'm Dr. Forbes," he said as he drew up a chair. "I believe that you are the two gentlemen who found the sheriff's body?"

"Yeah, we are," nodded Smoky. "Both gentlemen an' founders."

"I dunno about the gentlemen," snorted Dug. "Yuh just don't know Smoky very well, Doc."

Forbes smiled slightly. "Our deputy was greatly upset," he said. "He never mentioned the details. Peter Grant was my very best friend, and would appreciate it if you would tell me all that you know."

Smoky grinned. He like to talk. He told the doctor everything that he knew.

"Then you saw the killer?" asked the doctor.

"Yeah, Smoky saw him, but he was—"

"I saw him, that's all there was to it," interrupted Smoky as he glared at Dug, who shrugged his shoulders and took another bite.

The doctor left them after a few more questions. Smoky and Dug finished their meal, picked up their warbags at the stable and went to the hotel where they secured a room.

By evening the women had returned to their homes and the men were gathered around town. Many of them gathered at the King's Taste, the largest saloon and dance hall in San Felipe. All conversation was about the killing of the sheriff.

SMOKY SMITH and Dug Evans entered the smoke-filled saloon and looked around. They knew no one, so they made their way to the bar. As they downed their drinks, a big, red-faced, well dressed man stepped in beside Smoky and ordered a drink. His clothes fit him well, and he wore the largest diamonds Smoky ever saw.

"I'm sure it was Rickey Kent," said the big man as he turned to a man standing on the other side of him. "Him an' the sheriff nearly had a showdown in here yesterday when Grant warned him about seein' Mary Grant. Rickey's wild, an' he doesn't heed advice."

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"Yeah, he has a mind of his own," agreed the man. "I heard he sent Mary a note askin' her to elope with him, an' the sheriff got the note. That's the way I heard it started."

"I dunno about that," said the big man as he ordered another drink, "but I saw the sheriff slap Rickey down yesterday an' take his gun away from him. Right then I told the boys that Rickey would be gunnin' for Grant. Rickey sure told the sheriff off, an' everyone in San Felipe heard him—an' many ears burned! He threatened to come back, sayin' that San Felipe was too small for both of 'em!"

"What do yuh think will happen, Big Jim?" asked the smallest man.

Big Jim Ross, owner of the King's Taste, leaned against the bar and studied the people in the saloon. Here and there were small groups discussing the killing.

"I dunno," he replied, "but from all indications I look for a lynchin'."

"That's the way I feel about it," nodded the smaller man. "I wonder if Goose Martin found Rickey? I'd hate to be in that deputy's boots when he does."

Big Jim turned and looked at Smoky and Dug, who were interested listeners. He grinned and held out a meaty hand, saying:

"You're strangers—welcome to the King's Taste. I'm Big Jim Ross, owner. Have a drink on the house."

"Thanks," replied Smoky as he introduced himself and Dug. They all shook hands.

"Are you the gents that found the sheriff's body?" asked Ross. Smoky nodded, so Ross continued, "I thought so. The stage driver said it was two strangers. Reckon Goose was so damn upset he didn't know who was out there. Didja see anyone out there?"

"Smoky saw who done it," said Dug before he realized what he was saying. He swallowed hard and glanced at Smoky.

"I never said that—it was Dug," snorted Smoky. "I said I saw the man who shot at us. Mebbe it was the same man—I didn't ask him."

"He shot at us," nodded Dug. "That's all we know—then we went on to find the body. If he hadn't killed the sheriff, why would he shoot at us?"

"Yeah, that's right," nodded Big Jim as he faced Smoky. "If yuh saw him—who was it?"

"I dunno the people down here—an' besides, he was too far away for me to see him very good."

"Oh," muttered Big Jim as he turned back to the bar and picked up his glass.

Several persons had moved in during the conversation, and they eyed Smoky and Dug as they made their way out of the saloon. They stopped on the high board walk and looked up and down the main street of San Felipe. Horses filled the hitchracks, but there was hardly a person in sight.

"Will yuh ever learn to keep yore mouth shut?" snorted Smoky.

"I never said anythin' wrong," protested Dug. "I was just tellin' 'em what we saw."

"What *I* saw," corrected Smoky dryly. "Looks like life in the sheriff's office. Let's see."

They crossed the street. There was a flickering light inside the sheriff's quarters which stood next to the hotel. Smoky knocked on the door. After a brief pause, the door opened a few inches and the barrel of a shotgun appeared, pointed at the boys.

"Hold it, Martin," said Smoky. "We ain't comin' lookin' for trouble."

The door opened wider, allowing the light to illuminate their features. The deputy studied them over the top of the gun barrel for several seconds, then he opened the door and set the gun beside the door.

"My Gawd, if it ain't Smoky Smith!"

He reached out and pumped Smoky's hand, then Smoky introduced Dug.

"Yuh see, Duggie, he hasn't forgotten me," grinned Smoky as they closed the door and Goose Martin placed a bar across it.

"Can't be too careful right now," he said. "Got me a prisoner that I'm afraid the crowd might want."

"The killer?" asked Smoky.

Goose shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno," he replied as he sat down at the desk. "Everythin' indicates that Rickey Kent is guilty, but he says he isn't. He says that he'd never kill a man—even Peter Grant. I'm lost, Smoky, honestly I am. I always could turn to Pete for help—but now he's gone. I dunno what to do."

"Just do what you think is right," said Smoky.

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"That's what I'm doin'," grunted Goose. "I sneaked into town an' brought Rickey in the back way. If they knew he was here, I'd really be in hot water."

"Do yuh think Kent did it?" asked Dug.

Goose shrugged his shoulders. "Honestly, I don't know. Pete left here this mornin' sayin' that he did wrong in slappin' the kid an' taking his gun. He said he was goin' out to square himself with Rickey 'cause Peter was one feller that hated trouble. He figured that bein' sheriff, he ort to do that. I told him he was a fool because Rickey's plain dynamite an' he started it, so let him come to town an' apologize—but he didn't. That's the last I seen of him until we found him in the road, an'—an' hell, wasn't that you two that found him first?"

SMOKY nodded. "You were a little upset, Goose."

"Don't I know it!" sighed the deputy. "Tell me what you know about it, Smoky."

Smoky recounted all they knew about the shooting.

"It happened right near Rickey Kent's ranch," said Goose. "I found Pete's bronc out there grazin' when I went for Kent. It all points toward Kent. All I've got to do is keep him until court opens." He paused and looked at the boys. "It's been years since I last saw yuh, Smoky. What brings yuh down this way?"

"Twenty dollars," replied Smoky.

Goose rubbed his long nose thoughtfully, then he grinned and shook his head. "Yeah, I remember now. Thought I could beat a full house with a pair of aces, an' you loaned me the twenty to get me out of the game. Hell, Smoky, I still ain't got twenty bucks, but when I do, yuh'll get it."

"That's what I figured," said Smoky. "So we came down here to collect. Mebbe yuh'll be made sheriff now, Goose, an' yuh'll have an extra twenty in that pay check."

"I dunno if I want the job, Smoky. It ain't what it's cracked up to be—bein' a law officer."

"Yeah, we know," nodded Dug as he got to his feet. "I'm gettin' tired—how about you, Smoky?"

"Yeah, I can use a little shut-eye. See yuh tomorrow, Goose."

"Don't mention anythin' about my prisoner," begged Goose as the boys nodded and left the office.

ALL eyes were on the buggy that came slowly down the main street of San Felipe the following morning. Handling the reins, dressed in black, was Mary Grant, daughter of the murdered sheriff. She first went to the doctor's house at the further end of town, then after an hour she came back uptown and stopped in front of the sheriff's office.

Smoky Smith and Dug Evans sat on the hotel porch and watched the girl as she climbed out of the buggy. Smoky got quickly to his feet, stepped off the walk and took charge of the reins.

"I'll tend to 'em, ma'am," said Smoky, as he tried to tip his sombrero and take the reins at the same time. He got the reins tangled around his neck and he dropped his hat.

Mary eyed him suspiciously as she stopped on the boardwalk. Smoky tried to be serious, but he forgot the reins as he stopped over to pick up his hat, and he nearly choked himself, but Dug came off the porch just in time to save him.

"That's all right, ma'am," said Dug. "He does it every time. Yuh gotta allow for certain things—an' Smoky's one of 'em."

Mary turned away, the corners of her drawn mouth twitching as she tried to keep from laughing at poor Smoky Smith, who was gasping for breath as Dug freed him from the reins. She hurried into the sheriff's office and closed the door behind her.

"Yuh'll do it every time," snorted Dug. "A pretty girl, an' yuh go outta yore head."

"I did no such thing!" snapped Smoky. "I just wanted to help the lady, that's all."

They went back up on the hotel porch and sat down. Several persons moved past, looking at them, then curiously at the closed door of the sheriff's office.

"Wonderin' what's goin' on inside," muttered Smoky as he rolled a cigarette and lighted it. "Curiosity is a great thing, Duggie."

"Uh-huh, yuh ort to know, Smoky. Yo're plumb loaded with it."

Just then the door opened and the girl stepped outside, banging the door behind her. She strode across the walk, jerked

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at the reins, climbed into the buggy and sent the horse and buggy down the street.

"Always lookin' at pretty faces!" snorted Dug.

"Not that. Didn't yuh see her face? Man, yuh could tell that she was really sore. It was red as a beet. C'mon, let's visit Goose an' see what happened."

"Who's curious now?" grinned Dug as he followed Smoky to the office, where they found the door locked. Smoky hammered on the door.

Goose Martin peered out the fly-specked window, then opened the door. He leaned against the wall and looked at the two men. His face was pale, drawn, his eyes red, and he was trembling.

"What's the matter, Goose?" asked Smoky as the deputy made his way over to a cot and sat down.

"I—I dunno," he stammered. "Didja see Mary? Well sir, she came in here feelin' all right, but when she found out that I had Rickey Kent locked up, she broke loose. Man, I never knew what it was like."

"What what was like?" queried Smoky.

"A woman's wrath," sighed Goose. "I never did find out jist which way she felt—glad he was in jail or what."

"Woman are funny critters," sighed Dug. "Yuh never know which way they'll leap. How's the prisoner?"

"Fine," sighed the deputy, "but I wished I could say the same for me. I never slept a wink last night. I thought shore that mob would come in here an' take Rickey out. The prosecutin' attorney was in late last night an' he said that Big Jim Ross was eggin' 'em on. He holds a lotta weight around here. I dunno how he found out Rickey was locked up, but he did. There ain't much goin' on in San Felipe that Big Jim doesn't know about."

"Do yuh really think they'll attempt anythin'?" asked Smoky.

"Uh-huh, I know 'em," nodded Goose as he got to his feet and went over to the desk where he opened a top drawer. He squinted at Smoky and Dug, and said huskily, "Raise yore right hand! I swear yuh both in as deputies."

"You what?" gasped Dug.

"Yo're my deputies," exclaimed Goose. "I ain't goin' to stay in here another night alone."

"But—but we don't crave minglin' with a lynchin' mob," said Smoky. "We wanna live, Goose."

"Yuh want that twenty bucks, don'tcha?"

"Well, yeah, I could use it," nodded Smoky.

"Then yuh'll stay here an' help me, 'cause if I get killed, yuh'll never collect."

Smoky and Dug looked at each other as Goose handed each of them a badge, which they pinned on their skirts. Dug wiped his badge carefully.

"Looks kinda nice, doesn't it?" he said proudly.

"Makes a fine target," groaned Smoky.

They talked about the conditions around San Felipe. Things had been going along without any trouble until Rickey and the sheriff had their argument.

"Love makes a man see red sometimes," reminded Smoky.

"Take Smoky's word for it," grinned Dug. "He 'ort to know. Smoky's a great lover."

"Aw-w-w-w-w, l o v e r—hell!" snorted Smoky, then changing the subject quickly, he added, "Goose, how come you ride shotgun on the stage? Are you the only honest person in the country?"

"Steve Ford allus works as shotgun guard, when a bunch o' gold goes through from the mines north o' here, but this time he was up in Westport, gettin' over a drunk, I reckon, an' somebody had to take the job."

"Oh, I was just wonderin'," grunted Smoky. "Was it a big shipment?"

"Biggest o' the year," replied Goose.

A KNOCK at the door caused them all to be alert. Smoky loosened his gun as Goose went to the door and slid the bar back. He opened it a few inches and peered outside, then he swung the door open and let a small, thin, man in to the room. The man's sombrero was tilted back, exposing a thatch of blonde hair. He looked at Smoky and Dug. Goose quickly introduced the boys to Steve Ford.

As he shook hands, Smoky noticed that Ford's right arm was stiff at the elbow, causing him to carry the arm at a bent angle.

Ford noticed Smoky's gaze and said, "Bullet a few years ago did it. What's this I hear about Pete, Goose?"

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The deputy told all he knew while Steve Ford sat and listened.

"I heard plenty across the street at the King's Taste," said Steve, "but I just couldn't believe it. To think that Rickey killed Pete." He shook his head sadly. "Sometimes I lose faith in mankind."

"It's been a blow to all of us," said Goose.

"I saw Doc Forbes up the street an' he said that he's goin' to hold an inquest this afternoon, an' he told me to tell yuh, Goose," said Steve.

"Reckon he knows I don't want to leave this office."

"I don't blame yuh none," sighed Steve. "I heard Big Jim talkin' about a lynchin'. If I can help yuh, Goose, I'll be around."

"I'll need all the help I can get if they start," said Goose. "I've deputized these boys to help me."

"Well, I'll mingle around with the gang an' see if I can find out anythin'," said Steve Ford.

The inquest, held in the dance hall of the King's Taste, brought nearly everyone in San Felipe. Goose Martin and Dr. Forbes took charge of the inquest and selected a jury. Mary Grant, dressed in black, was the center of attention as she sat in the front row.

Smoky Smith and Dug Evans both told their version of the shooting and the finding of the body of Peter Grant. Dr. Forbes questioned Smoky about seeing the killer.

"Yeah," said Smoky, "I saw him, but he was too far away for me to see who he was."

The coroner's jury listened to all angles, then they indicted Rickey Kent for the murder of Sheriff Peter Grant. The inquest broke up with the people moving out into the street where they grouped about, discussing the crime. Goose Martin assisted Mary Grant across the street while the crowd watched.

Smoky and Dug hurried to the office, where Steve Ford had stayed on guard during the inquest. They had the door open when Mary and Goose came in. Mary was crying. She looked at the boys, but gave no sign of recognition as Goose led her to the rear where the cells were located.

"What's goin' on?" asked Steve Ford, eager of the latest news. Smoky told him in a few words what had happened. Goose came back and joined them.

"Mary wants to talk with Rickey alone," he said as he sat down. "She seems to think that he didn't do it. Her reason is that if he had done it, why did he stay at his ranch an' offer no resistance when I went out there an' arrested him."

Smoky rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "That sounds logical."

"Yeah, but," Goose cuffed his sombrero over one eye, "I dunno what to do. They said to hold Rickey Kent for murder. He says he didn't do it—they say he did."

The door opened and a tall, lanky man dressed in a dark suit came into the room and looked at the four men. He wore glasses which continually slipped to the end of his long, pointed nose.

"Our prosecutin' attorney," said Goose dryly. "What can we do for you, Henry Sartwell?"

Sartwell cleared his throat. "I believe that we have a very good case against Rickey Kent, Martin," he said slowly. "He is guilty, and we shouldn't have a difficult time proving it. I believe that he should be held incommunicado."

"Be held what?" queried Smoky.

"Incom—" Sartwell smiled slightly and explained, "I believe that no one should be allowed to see him until time for his trial, unless he desires a lawyer."

Just then Mary Grant came from the rear of the building. She stopped short when she saw the prosecuting attorney. He eyed her closely.

"See that no one sees Kent," he snapped and left the office.

"Was that for my benefit?" asked Mary.

"Not particularly," replied Goose. "He thinks he knows everythin', but I'm runnin' this office the way I want to run it. What did yuh find out, Mary?"

She sighed and shook her head. "Rickey says he never did it, Goose," she replied, "and I believe him."

"I dunno what to believe," sighed the deputy.

"I hope you can clear Rickey if he didn't do it," said Mary as she went to the front door. "The funeral is going to take place tomorrow mornin'."

"I'll be there," said Goose.

Steve Ford opened the door for Mary, and

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he went out with her. The deputy sat down at the desk and glared at Smoky and Dug. "I'm goin' crazy," he said slowly. "Who believes who?"

Smoky got to his feet and went over to a gun-rack where he examined the rifles.

"Enough there to protect us?" asked Dug, but Smoky ignored him as he took a rifle down and examined it closely. He took out the shells and shoved them into his shirt pocket.

Dug and Goose watched, wondering what Smoky was up to. The tall cowboy took the rifle, turned, and went back to the cells where he spoke to Rickey Kent. The young, slick-haired cowboy looked up from his bunk. His brown eyes searched Smoky's face, wondering what he was doing with a rifle. He got up and came over to the bars.

Goose and Dug stood in the doorway, watching Smoky as he handed the empty rifle to the prisoner. The two men stepped back, using the wall as a shield. They peered around the corner, watching.

"It's empty, Rickey," said Smoky. "All I want yuh to do is to put it to yore shoulder an' point it at anythin', like yuh was goin' to shoot."

Mystified, Rickey Kent raised the rifle, squinted down the sights as he pointed it at the blank wall. Smoky shook his head.

"Thanks," he said as he took the rifle away from Rickey, who looked a little bewildered, wondering what had happened to the lanky cowboy.

Smoky came back into the office, reloaded the rifle and place it in the gun-rack. Goose and Dug looked at him, then at each other as Smoky walked to the front window and looked outside.

"Like I told yuh," sighed Dug. "He has his periods."

"Looks more like question-marks to me," grunted Goose.

SATURDAY followed another night of unrest in San Felipe, but nothing happened. There was much talk of breaking into the jail and lynching Rickey Kent, but Big Jim Ross couldn't promote the idea strong enough in the minds of the men who entered his saloon. Smoky Smith, Dug Evans, Goose Martin and Steve Ford stayed in the sheriff's office and took turns throughout the night staying awake and on guard.

At ten o'clock, San Felipe was buzzing with people who came to pay their last respects to Sheriff Peter Grant. Smoky and Dug remained at the sheriff's office while Goose escorted Mary Grant to the services which were conducted by Dr. Forbes. The services lasted two hours which included the burial in the cemetery north of town.

Men came back to town, left their women folks, and went to the King's Taste Saloon. Goose took Mary back to her house where she wanted to be alone, then he hurried back to the office.

"Trouble's brewin'," he said. "I heard plenty—an' I think that tonight's the night."

"Mebbe we ort to get Rickey outta here," suggested Smoky.

"Where'd we take him?' asked Goose.

"I dunno," replied Smoky, "but any place is better'n bein' trapped in here."

Goose went back to the cells where he talked with Rickey, who asked, "Why are they so bitter against me? I *didn't* kill Grant. Yes, we had an argument, but that's all. Why don't they wait until the trial is held before passin' judgment? I wanted to marry Mary, an' she felt the same way about me. Is there a law against such a thing?"

Goose shook his head. "Everythin' points to you," he sighed. "You know how things stand now, Rickey. I don't want yore blood on my hands. Where can we hide yuh out until this dies down?"

Rickey shook his head. Goose walked to the rear door, slipped it open and looked out. Quickly he closed the door and barred it.

"There's one o' Big Jim's men out there watchin'," he said to Rickey as he hurried back into the office where he told Smoky and Dug, "We can't get Rickey out now, even if we wanted to."

"They figured we might try somethin' like that," said Smoky.

"Good Lord, what a way to die," sighed Dug.

"Who's goin' to die?" demanded Goose.

"Why, I just ain't shore yet," repiled Dug seriously, "but we're supposed to uphold the law, ain't we? Didn't someone once say—'Yuh'll get my prisoner over my dead body'?"

"Yeah, I heard that once," nodded Goose, "but I didn't say it. Mebbe we'll be able to keep 'em outta here. We can block the door an' a few shots might keep 'em back."

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THEY sat there all afternoon, one or the other watching out through the front window. Nearly all the men in town were in the King's Taste across the street, but there was always one man outside watching the front of the sheriff's office. It was dark when Steve Ford reported to the office. Goose pulled the shade down on the front window and lighted the oil lamp on the desk.

"It's bad, boys," said Steve. "I've been nosin' around, an' I heard 'em makin' their plans. They've already got the rope in the saloon, the loop all tied."

"Mebbe we'd better get outta here," suggested Dug.

"No, yuh don't," snapped Goose. "Yo're my deputies."

"I don't crave bein' a deputy," said Dug. "You can have my badge right now, Goose. I came here with Smoky to collect twenty dollars, not to get killed tryin' to defend a prisoner."

"All right," sighed Goose. "Gimme yore badge. What about you, Smoky?"

"I never figured on dyin' in San Felipe either," sighed Smoky as he started to unfasten the badge from his shirt when there was a knock at the front door, and an excited voice said:

"Open up, Martin—it's me—Henry Sartwell."

Steve opened the door while Smoky, Goose and Dug held their guns trained on the door. The prosecuting attorney stepped into the office and Steve slammed and barred the door.

"Oh, my goodness!" exclaimed Sartwell when he saw the guns on him. Put—put those guns down!"

"What do you want?" demanded Goose.

"I just heard that the lynching party is about to start," replied Sartwell, "and I thought I might warn you, Martin. Can't you get Kent out of here?"

Goose shook his head. "Both doors are bein' watched. We thought of it this noon, but they were watchin' then. We haven't a chance but to stay here an' try to hold 'em off."

"Good Lord, man, you can't stop the entire town of San Felipe," snorted Sartwell. "They'll tear this building down."

"We've got to stick," declared Goose, but there was not a lot of assurance in his voice.

"I'll tell yuh about me," said Dug. "I'd a lot rather be a live coward than a dead hero. When they pile flowers around me, I want to be able to smell 'em."

"Aw-w-w-w," grunted Smoky. "They ain't aimin' to kill us, Duggie."

To prove his calmness, Smoky rolled a cigarette, took out a match, struck it on the desk top. He put the match in his mouth and threw the cigarette away. He puffed in apparent enjoyment. Steve said:

"They want Rickey—an 'they'd kill us to get him. What was that?"

Smoky became aware of the match and spat it out as he stepped over to the window and pulled the curtain back a little and peered outside. "Listen, they're on their way over!"

"Oh, my Gawd!" gasped Sartwell. "I must get out of here!"

The lawyer sank down on the cot, tugging nervously at his shirt collar, his face sickly white, his eyes wide with fright.

They heard the dull rumble of conversation, footsteps on the boardwalk. Sartwell tore his collar open, ripped his shirt front.

"I—I've got to get out of here," he whispered huskily. "I can't be—"

"Yuh are, though, pardner," said Smoky. "You sink or swim with us. Grab a gun an' get ready."

A heavy object thudded against the front door, and a voice yelled:

"All right, boys—open this door, or we'll smash it in. If yuh obey orders, none of yuh will get hurt. Otherwise, we won't be responsible. I'll give yuh exactly ten seconds to open it!"

"That's Big Jim Ross's voice," said Goose.

"My Gawd, open the door!" pleaded Henry Sartwell. "I—I don't want to die—yet."

The men were all staring at the door, except Smoky, who was staring at Steve Ford. Steve had picked up a Winchester rifle and was stuffing shells into the loading-gate.

"When they start smashing that door," he said, "I'll make it awful hot outside." Then he shifted the gun and lined up the sights toward the door.

"Don't shoot, Steve," snapped Goose. "Let them make the first break."

"Steve, yuh dirty killer!" yelled Smoky. "Drop that gun!"

Smoky's yell was disconcerting, amazing.

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Steve whirled, trying to cock the rifle, when Smoky, diving like a football tackle, went under that swinging gun barrel and grasped Steve around the thighs. The rifle blasted a hole in the wall above the sheriff's desk, and Dug dived flat on the floor. Sartwell yelled and fell off the cot while Goose backed into the doorway leading to the cells and watched with mouth half-open, astonished.

THE shot through the wall had halted the mob, although it was too high to hit anyone on the street. The strange part of it all was Smoky and Steve, fighting like mad. They banged into the wall, slithered into the corner, got up and went at it again. Twice Steve tried to draw his six-shooter, but each time Smoky drove his head back with right uppercuts. They were not talking, being too intent on knocking each other's heads off. The mob was forgotten—this was actual.

"Stop it, yuh crazy fools!" yelled Dug. "Here we are, facin' a mob, an' you two start havin' fun."

Someone outside flung a chunk of two-by-four through the window of the office, tearing away the shade, giving some of the attacking force a chance to see what was going on. It was a great fight—but why?

Both men were bruised and bleeding, panting, swinging wildly. Suddenly Smoky, shocked back by a vicious kick, sagged down, started a punch from the floor, which hit Steve squarely on the chin—and the fight was over. A half-dozen men were leaning through the broken window, staring in amazement, as Smoky picked up Steve and slammed him against the wall.

"Want me to hit yuh again?" asked Smoky hoarsely.

"No, no," wheezed Steve. "I—I'm through—don't hit me!"

"All right," husked Smoky, "go ahead an' tell 'em the truth. You killed the sheriff. If yuh lie, I'll knock out the rest of yore teeth, you coyote! Tell 'em you killed him, an' we'll save yuh for the law. Go ahead an' talk, you coyote pup!"

"I—I killed Grant," whimpered Steve. "I—I knew the gold was goin' through. The sheriff ran into me—I had to kill him. I didn't try to put it on Rickey Kent—I swear I didn't."

Smoky sagged against the desk, staring at the mob in the window, and said wearily, "Go away, yuh fools. You almost hung the wrong man. An' you ain't hangin' this'n either. Go home an' tell—tell yore mother she wants yuh."

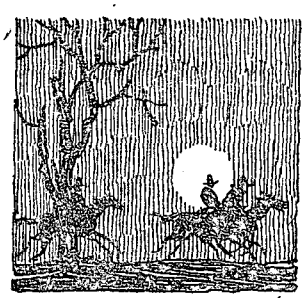
Smoky Smith's hands slid off the desk and he went flat on the floor. After all, you can only stand so much. Dug picked him up and put him in a chair. Smoky was grinning weakly as he watched Goose place Ford in a cell, letting Rickey Kent out.

"All right, Smoky," said Dug. "How on earth didja happen to figure Steve? Nothin' was said—nothin'——"

"I saw the man at the shootin'," reminded Smoky. "I saw him shoot that rifle. He held one hand almost against the lever, instead of out along the forearm of the barrel. Rickey don't do that, I proved it. But Steve did, blast him—an' when I yelled at him, he tried to shoot me. I knowed then he was my man."

"He also shoots left-handed," said a man in the window, "an' he's got a kinda stiff elbow in his right arm."

"I didn't notice that," said Smoky wearily. "I only notice the essential things."



"Dead Man's Trail Herd"

A novelette by

WALT COBURN

In the next

SHORT STORIES

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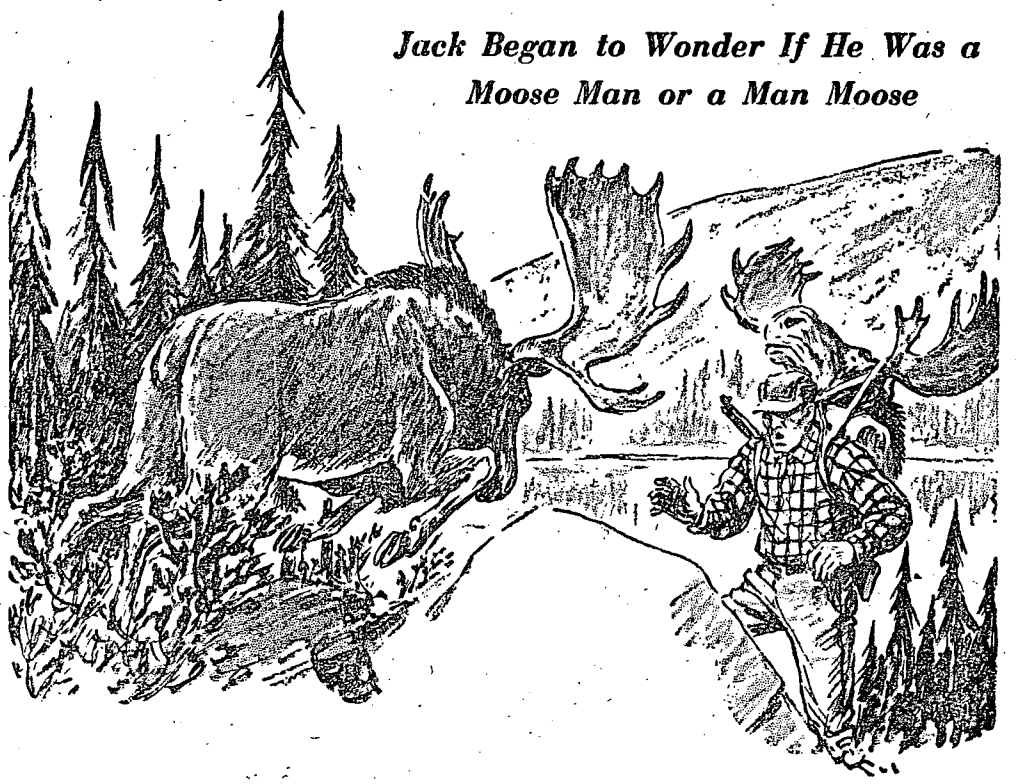

Jack Began to Wonder If He Was a Moose Man or a Man Moose

Two Moosehead Jack

By CLAY PERRY

JACK RANDALL, licensed guide, was on his way up the Manitou Route to get a bull moose, not for meat for himself, but for a head for a wealthy city man whom he had guided over this route during the past summer. At that time it was illegal to shoot moose or deer, and after seeing some mighty bulls feeding along the route, the city man had coveted a pair of antlers and head to be mounted for his lodge, down near Fort Frances.

"You get me a good head and I'll pay you $200 for it," the man wrote to Jack. "My friends won't believe that I saw such moose as I've shown them in the pictures I took last summer, unless they were in a game enclosure somewhere. I enclose a check to take care of your outfitting. The balance will follow as soon as you wire me you've got a good, perfect head."

Jack knew where there was excellent moose country. It was tough terrain, a land of rock and scattered lakes, of deep gulches and high ridges of treacherous muskeg, known to few, for the guides did not take parties into it; it was not even well mapped, for this was before the use of aerial photography from planes. Jack did not have any map at all with him. Had he been guiding a party they would have had some sort of maps and Jack would have depended somewhat upon them. Mostly however, he would depend on his woodcraft and memory from having once, some years ago, crossed over this area, known as the Country Between, for it lay between the two main canoe routes, Manitou and Eagle Rock.

JACK had started up the day before the season opened, paddling the whole distance up Rainy Lake despite the fact that he could have had a tow from a friend with an outboard on his big cedar canoe. Jack

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did not want to advertise his errand, and he hastened to portage over into the first narrows on the route, a swift stream that connected one of the long chain of lakes with another, and so on.

He saw no moose at all along the shores, feeding on aquatic growth in the shallows as they did in summer, for ice was already forming at night on the water's edge and the herds were moving into the deep swamps to feed and to yard up when deep snows came. There would be moose in the Country Between, and there nobody hunted them save the Indians—for meat, not especially for trophies to hang on a wall.

Jack traveled light, his dunnage consisting of a sleeping bag, tin dishes, his rifle, ammunition, a belt axe, hunting knife, a simple fishing outfit, some hard biscuits and dried beef and tea. A leaded lure dropped overboard on a hand line almost anywhere along the route would get him bass, pickerel, lake trout. He might easily knock over a sitting duck, here and there, and even if he went hungry for a day, very soon there would be rich, red moose steak to broil over camp fire coals before a spruce leanto.

He planned to make the cross-over by a route, or a sort of one, so that he would emerge to the east, into Eagle Rock Route, and be nearer to Fort Frances than if he came back out onto the Manitou Route. He believed it would be easier to get his moose head out that way.

At about one hundred miles up Manitou Route, near the north end of Manitou Lake, Jack began looking for portage sign, indicating a place to carry over into the Country Between and its small lakes. He failed to find any and was nearing the next narrows, leading out of Manitou Lake and on north, when he saw smoke rising in the still, bright air, up ahead. He realized that he was within a short distance of the cabin where lived a character known as Bearhide Bill Jackson. The man was an old trapper, hunter and gold prospector who had lived alone in the wilds for half a lifetime and who was better acquainted with every nook and cranny of this thousands of square miles of practically uninhabited country than even the Indians who roamed it for fish, game and wild fruits, but who lived on the reservation near Fort Frances.

Things had changed, as nature does change, astonishingly, since Jack had made the cross-over. Even then he had made it from the other side, from Eagle Rock, and although he was sure that he knew many of the lakes in there, he was doubtful now that he could find the best route through. He decided to paddle on and make a call on Bearhide Bill. Jack had brought some customers to Bill's cabin door, vacationing tourists cruising the waterways and always looking for some souvenir to spend money on. Bearhide maintained a sort of wilderness souvenir stand, with such rare and expensive items as big bearskins, deer antlers, mounted golden eagles—and as well, some gilded pieces of paper which represented stock in some of the claims that Bill had staked and had given fancy names to rouse the lust for gold in the minds of the greenhorns.

Playing his part as a man of the wilds, Bill had made himself a shaggy coat of bearskin, hence his nickname.

"Howdy, Bill," was Jack's casual greeting as he stood in the open door of the cabin and peered into its dim interior at the gray-bearded, round-shouldered hermit who was crouched before the fireplace, scraping away at the fat on the inside of a fresh bearhide.

"Howdy, Jack. Come on in and set and put on the nosebag," was the instant welcome. "Jest b'ilin' up some fresh meat. Out lookin' timber, I s'pose."

Jack knew he didn't "s'pose" anything of the sort, and gave an answer that might have been yes or no, and Bill didn't inquire further, at once. By that Jack knew Bill was suspicious, perhaps resentful. "I want to hear the news from down the route," Bill said, still on his knees and scraping. "Ain't heard nothin' sence the last of August when the Rangers made their last trip up the route."

JACK sat down on a greasy bench, pretending a deliberation he did not feel. He spun out some of the events and incidents of the border towns while the old man alternated between the steaming iron pot that hung over the coals and the ill-smelling hide he was scraping. Jack wondered which it was that stank so. He wanted to get out and away but custom demanded that he at least chew on some boiled bear

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meat and bannock bread before he came to the point with inquiries about the best route through the Country Between.

"Why, ye kin foller a trail that I made, myself," declared Bearhide Bill when Jack did ask his advice in a flattering manner. "I was over clost to Eagle Rock jest a few weeks ago. Fact is, I left my canoe at the last portage, on the east side of Deep Lake. I aim to go over and git it 'fore the freeze-up, but say, you won't be wantin' to paddle the route if ye're timber-lookin', will ye? Lemme look at your canoe. Mebbe we kin make a deal. Ye see, I was doin' some prospectin' along the Gold Reef outcrop, and I couldn't tote the durned Peterboro up them clifts. So I left it cached and h'isted my hoofs over the rocks and circled home. Mine's a bit bigger'n your'n, Jack, but I'd make an even trade, and we'd both be better off. See? You'd have a good canoe clost to Eagle Rock Route and I'd have one here. See?"

Jack saw the point, all right, but he was cautious.

"How old is your Peterboro?" he asked. "Mine's only in its second season."

"Same as mine, then," declared Bill. "And I put some new ribs in her this summer."

"Had a smash-up?"

"Nope. I put 'em in to give her more stren'th. I tote a lot of weight, sometimes, such as a b'ar."

It occurred to Jack that he was going to have to tote a lot of weight if he shot a moose and had the big head to carry, and he would certainly be better off to be relieved of a canoe on the cross-over, for if he took his along it would mean two carry-overs at every portage. On the other hand, with a canoe waiting for him at the Moss Lake-Eagle Rock portage, he would have but one carry-over to the main route, and there'd be pretty clear paddling down to Redgut Bay and home. A reinforced Peterboro would be just the ticket.

The upshot was that the deal was made and Jack drew from Bill's fluent lips a rapid-fire description of the trail through the Country Between.

"Ye kin paddle yer canoe down to the fu'st portage, just a mile below hyar, and that leads to Uptop Lake, a quarter of a mile. Ye kin round Uptop, follerin' my blazes, and git over to Round Lake. It's really round, with a island in the middle. Ye can't mistake it. Ye kin find the blaze on a dead spruce that's lodged in a live one at the north shore. Foller up a dry run and over the ridge and then down to Moss Lake, and round it to the nor'nor'east, and thar's where I left my canoe."

"Do you suppose it'll be in good shape, now?" asked Jack.

"Shore, shore! I cached her upside down in some rocks and leaned some around her so nothin' could tip her over. Ye'll see a skinned popular bent over her like a bow. I'll go take a look at yours now; then you can paddle down to the portage and cache it and I'll get it soon's I finish this hide."

Bill limped down to the rude dock where Jack had moored and inspected Jack's entire outfit with squinting, sharp old eyes.

"Look's like you're outfitted for a quick trip," he observed. "I can't travel so fast as I used. Say, you don't know where I might sell a good moose head, do ye?" he inquired sharply.

"Er—why? You got one to sell?" Jack asked, a bit startled.

"Nope, not yet, but I aim to—and my aim's still purty good. Well, looks like your canoe matches mine, almost. Good timber lookin'!"

Jack thanked him for his directions and hospitality, at the same time wondering why old Bill was so ready with the trade and advice. A few days later he began to think he understood why.

The first portage was a steep climb through dense, tough weed trees such as alders and populars, where only ancient blaze marks showed, and Jack thought he had taken the wrong trail until he saw gleaming water of Uptop Lake spread out before him. After that the going was somewhat easier, the ground more level, though it was sometimes swampy, spongy stuff and Jack had to wade up to his knees under his load. That load got lighter when he came across fresh moose tracks in a swamp that he judged lay between Uptop and Round lakes. They were big tracks, sunk deep, and Jack felt that he was going to be lucky, right at the start. Jack followed those tracks, which deviated from the main trail, which was not too good, anyway, and the moose run was no more difficult to travel.

However, it began to sink deeper, with

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the hoof thrusts of more than one moose, and Jack made out that cows and calves had trodden it, heading for some destination deeper in the woods. They were traveling fast, too, and when dusk came Jack had not got near the herd, and he had to make a cold camp and wait for dawn. His dried beef and bannock biscuits tasted better than the tough bear meat he had gulped at Bearhide Bill's and took the greasy, strong taste of that mess out of his mouth. He dreamed of a camp next day where he could build a fire and roast fresh moose steaks.

It was very cold that night, and there was skim ice on the black pools of water in the swamp when Jack hastened on at dawn, his shoepacks as stiff as boards when he forced them on his feet, but before noon they were more pliable from being soaked through as the moose run grew to be mostly a narrow canal. It led him away from the direction of Round Lake, but Jack kept his mind on the lake, and estimated the distance he was going off at a tangent from it.

It was mid-afternoon and quite dark in the woods when Jack sighted a standing, swaying huge form through a screen of spruces. It was a bull moose, feeding from the twigs, at the same time, scratching himself, and he stood across the trail, broadside to Jack, but even with such a target, Jack could hardly see to aim. He dared not try to creep closer because the bristling, dead branches sticking out of the lower portions of the tree trunks made a crackle every time they were touched.

He took what seemed his only chance, aimed for just behind a shoulder and pulled the trigger. The moose seemed to rise in the air and then go down and Jack threshed his way out of the thicket through which he had thrust the barrel of his gun and wondered how the great horned head had got through. His packsack was caught and almost wrenched off his shoulders by tough boughs that snatched at it and slapped him in the face, with stinging swipes, as he stumbled hurriedly on.

WHEN he got to the place where the bull had stood, it was empty. There was no moose, alive or dead, but there was beyond it a scattering of fresh tracks, that splayed out in three directions, as the herd which the bull must have been guarding to feed, had lunged and plunged off into a morass into which Jack's feet sank so deeply and firmly they could hardly be pulled out. Rapid travel for him was now impossible, and he felt like a snail chasing a cat. It was now so dark that Jack could not make out whether there was any blood on the ground or on the whipping branches. He could not doubt that he had hit the bull, but just where he could not guess, and after an hour of man-killing hoofing he had to stop and hunt for a rise of dry ground to spread his blanket-roll and huddle down for the long night.

In the cold, gray morning, full of nipping mist that was like floating frost, Jack chewed on some more dried beef and hard biscuits and took up the trail of the bull. That trail led farther away from Round Lake, but Jack did not expect, in the least, to get lost from it. It lay over to his right, perhaps two or three miles, he was quite sure of that. Now he began to see spatters of blood and the trail of the bull, now showing him to be alone, swung out of the old runway. The moose had been running fast, in great strides, galloping at times. The herd had not followed him. Jack kept doggedly on, spurred by the triple lure of game, hunger and thirst, for the swamp water was not fit to drink, and his mouth only kept moist when it watered at the thought of a sizzling steak for his next meal with hot tea to wash it down.

It was impossible even at high noon, to see farther than a score of feet in the spruce forest. Towering ancients grew as close together as grain in a field, with between them millions of smaller ones, making a matted tangle, so that Jack tripped often, and his tracking was a matter of head-down, hound-like seeking, his hands thrusting the dense growth apart, almost constantly, so that he could see the moose tracks.

But soon the ground rose and became firmer. A gentle slope graduated into a steep one. The trees became thinner, the undergrowth less tangled. Jack topped the rise where a sharp upthrust of rock broke through the soil and looked down, amazed, at a round lake. It was as round as a silver dollar, gleaming in the sun like silver, and sparkling ripples spread out in a wide V from the nigh shore.

The crowned head of a moose that was

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plowing the water at a distance of a hundred yards from shore explained the ripples, but Jack could not explain to himself how he had got to Round Lake, this way, and so soon. However, there was no time for conjectures. He leaned his rifle against a tree trunk, aimed carefully and fired.

The bullet made a splash ahead of the moose, and the bull swerved and turned aside. Jack's second shot struck and the great head tossed and shook madly: His third shot went wild—but it was not needed.

Jack started running down the slope to the lake. As he ran he caught glimpses through thin growth of poplars, birches and pin-cherries, of the bull, floundering, but now making back for the shore, as if to try to save imself by getting on land and into woods—but when the bull's hoofs struck bottom, he staggered, went to his knees, and stayed down, toppling slowly, and with a great, groaning sigh, lay still, in shallow water, not twenty yards from shore.

"I sure am lucky!" exulted Jack. "Darned fool that I am, if I wasn't lucky I'd never get that head—*not without my canoe*. If he'd kept on swimming he'd have sunk. Round Lake is a deep one."

Jack took off his clothes, blessing the sun that tempered the frosty air, waded in to where he could grasp the antlers and tow and drag the carcass toward shore. It took all his strength to get the heavy body so that the head lay on the rocky verge of the lake.

AS HE worked on it, swiftly, Jack discovered that his first shot, in the woods, had gone too high to be fatal, but that his hit of the swimming animal had been squarely in the back of the skull. The magnificent head was not harmed, as a trophy. The great, flat curving antlers had a spread which Jack could just about compass with outstretched arms.

In his elation and excitement, Jack did not take more than one of two casual glances about him, but when he had finished severing the head, leaving enough of the tough hide to wrap the raw flesh, after washing it well, and stood up to stretch, he gave an exclamation.

"No island? Bearskin Bill said there was one in the middle of Round Lake. The old coot must be losing his mind, or his memory. This sure must be Round Lake. Well, I'll just look for that blaze on a dead, down spruce."

He was close to the north shore of the lake, so he decided to load himself up before scouting for the blaze. He managed to get the moose head atop his back and roll, and lash it with rawhide strips he had brought with him, the ends dangling where he could grasp them and help balance the unwieldly head. The big muzzle stuck out over his forehead, the antlers spread out like branches and when he saw his image in the water, he laughed aloud.

"I look like a man moose or a moose man," he chuckled. "Hum! I'd make a good decoy for another bull!"

Not that he wanted another one, not even for meat, for he had carved off a hunk of the rump for steaks for several hearty meals, regretting he had to leave so much for the wolves.

He kept to high, dry ground as much as he could, having to descend to shore now and then to seek the blazed dead spruce. He never knew whether he had found it or not, bcause the only one answering to old Bill's description was a big stub that had slid down along a live tree, clear to the ground, stripping its bark off one side. That which was half imbedded in the soft, wet ground might have a blaze mark on it, but he had to assume so, because he did not want to unload and try to turn the trunk over. He struck off for what should be, next, Moss Lake. He wanted to get to the cached canoe before dark and make a fire, eat well, rest well, and gird himself for a double carry over up the "dry run." He could never tote the canoe and the moose head at once.

Jack remembered, faintly, how Moss Lake looked, from crossing it some years before. It was well-named, being circled by low shores covered for yards with a growth of springy, soft vegetation that concealed mud into which a man would sink at every step if he tried to trudge through it.

The next lake that Jack came to did not have mossy shores, and it was completely strange to Jack. Right then and there he dropped on his haunches and wriggled out from beneath his heavy load. He had got to find some sort of sign or he would be—maybe he was—lost. He hoisted the head into the crotch of a tree, high enough to be

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safe from wolves—and he had seen some quite fresh wolf tracks along the lake shore. Playing safe, he kept his pack on and his rifle slung on his shoulder. The lake was a crooked, mile-long body of sullen, black water and it took Jack two hours to circle to its eastern end—and there were no blazes, no portage sign. Beavers had done a job of damming, had cut most of the trees at this end and flooded an acre or more of woods and swamp. If there had been a portage sign when the lake was at normal extent, it was gone.

When Jack got back to his high-hung moose head he knew that he was lost and he cursed Bearhide Bill, bitterly, and then himself, for he could not be sure whether Bill had given false directions or he had mistaken them or wandered away from the trail in pursuit of the moose. He could backtrack to Manitou and Bill's cabin, but the idea of such a retreat repelled him. He had kept going east, since leaving the round lake, all right, and Eagle Rock was east, somewhere.

OVER in the woods across the crooked lake was a tall cliff with sizeable trees growing atop it. Jack made camp at the stub beneath the hanging head, cutting small spruces and balsams, looping boughs, standing them on end against the stub's lower branches, padding the ground with a quickly made "brush bed." Then, on a flat rock, Jack broiled his steak supper, smoked a pipe, while he made a grim decision, then curled up for the night.

Bearhide Bill's ears must have burned during that night, as Jack dreamed of pushing the old coot off a high cliff. Jack's ears tingled when he heard the wolves howling on far ridges, as they pursued some luckless prey, and he kept his rifle close at hand and a fire going.

At the break of dawn he was hoofing it around the west end of the lake, to avoid the beaver swamp, and soon clambering up the rise of the cliff. He climbed a tree with the least foliage near the top, and took a good, long, hard look eastward. It was tough-looking country, this hardrock area, with one gulch after another yawning in the pre-Cambrian shield, telling of hidden waters—but one of these gulches was wider than the others, and Jack's heart leaped.

"That is main route!" he told himself. "Eagle Rock."

Studying the terrain nearby he caught a glimpse of a small body of water, and at one end, the east end, a scar of brownish rock in the woods, rising to a height of land.

It was drizzling cold rain when Jack got back to his camp, and a chill east wind was blowing. He ate again, and then knocked down his leanto and burned it and his brush bed, for warmth and to dry himself for a hike of how many miles he could only estimate, for he could not push through in a bee-line, he well knew, but he knew now where to go.

He wasn't so mad at Bearhide Bill as he had been. He admitted to himself that he had probably lost himself soon after he left Uptop Lake and took the moose trail, but now he was going to get to that scar, the "dry run," he hoped, and find Bill's canoe and get over to Eagle Rock and paddle easily down to Port Frances through Redgut Bay. And collect $200 for a big moose head, then take a long rest at home before snow came and he would go up into the woods for the winter as a lumberjack.

His neck ached like a toothache from the strain of the tumpline load, before he reached the little body of water he had glimpsed from the tree-top, but he gave a whoop and forgot his aches when he saw the spread of green moss all around the shores.

Incredibly, he had found Moss Lake, and he was no longer worried. He found portage sign. He found the canoe.

"Blast his ruddy old hide!" he burst out. "He said he was here *a few weeks ago!* Maybe months. He's the biggest liar in Canada."

He was referring to Bearhide Bill, as he dumped his load on the wet ground beside a canoe, upside-down, with a hole in its bottom and its varnish blistered and peeling, and the tip of a young poplar showing through the hole.

"Must have been growing there since spring! And a bear's been mauling this wreck."

The scratches of a bear's claw showed plainly, but evidently, Bruin, after smashing the hole with a mighty blow, and tearing away some of the splinters, had lost interest in a foodless cache and had gone away.

With a lump in his throat and his breast,

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Jack pulled away the rocks that leaned against it, righted the craft and exploded:

"For this I traded my beauty! One bum paddle!"

IN HIS anger he had half a mind to abandon the moose head and back-track to Manitou and reclaim his own canoe, but in the other half of his mind, which was reasonable, he began to do what he had to do to get on over to Eagle Rock Route. He found plenty of pitch pine which oozed its gummy substance at one end of a stick while the other burned and he went to work with thick cuts of birch bark and the gluey pitch to mend the hole. He clamped the bark down by making extra ribs of springy spruce and forcing them in place. He was a woodsman and a craftsman. He had built himself a birch bark canoe once for the fun of it under instructions from an expert, old Top Tom, the head man of the Cree Reservation.

When the job was done Jack carried the canoe and launched it, carefully, and held his breath. Only a trickle of water came in around the patch, and Jack smeared on more pitch. It hardened fast, for it was raining and growing much colder. He moored the canoe with some of his rawhide and loaded up, fast, and started up the rocky dry bed of a stream.

At the top of the height of land Jack looked down onto another small lake, its eastern end vanishing in the woods. From his memory map Jack reckoned that this lake flowed eastward in a narrows and joined the Eagle Rock stream. He hung his wet load in a tree again and went back for the canoe. He had to fashion a flat stave to match the single paddle, for supports across the thwarts, under which he got his padded shoulders.

He made it to the height of land just before darkness stopped him, built a fire and roasted more moose steak, huddled under the canoe, propped up a bit, without benefit of even a brush bed.

When he got up in the morning the rain was almost sleet. His joints were stiff and aching, his head ached, his neck felt as if his spine had come unjointed. A hot fire, activity and confidence in his ability to reach the main route within an hour or two, cheered him as did the thought that in three days at most he would be home, with a $200 moose head and a thousand dollars' worth of experience.

He was loaded, again, and standing at the verge of the canyon overlooking its depths, when he heard a smashing, crackling noise behind him. He turned, clumsily, with his crazy burden topping him and making a man moose out of him—and faced a big bull in a charge straight at him. It looked like a horned elephant to Jack, and for a moment he was paralyzed. He could not unsling his rifle in time, he knew that, and he acted with desperate swiftness. He let his load slip off his head and shoulders down over the edge of the gulch. Then he slid backwards, clinging to the sharp edge of granite with his hands, as a great, bellowing body came on like an express train and sailed over his head and went smashing and crashing down with a noise like a steam-roller being wrecked, and continuing to roll over and over through the sparse growth of trees that clung in crevices in the canyon wall.

Then all was still save the soft hiss of wet sleet in the trees. It was coming down so thickly now that Jack could not see to the bottom of the gorge. He had slid his canoe down and lodged it in some young poplars, before he loaded himself up, intending to continue to take it down that way, rather than over his head. He got to the canoe and found it had not been damaged, and then he found his moose head and packsack, crumpled in some rocks—and the head was now decorated with only one pair of antlers. The left one was broken clean off at the base—but as his eyes rose from this $200 wreck, Jack found himself looking at another moose head which seemed to be staring at him, waiting for him.

He raised his rifle and was about to fire, but checked himself. It was going to cost him more than $200 if he shot two moose and the fact was discovered; it would cost him his hunting license, his guide's license, a fine and maybe jail.

He started to scramble back up, when he noticed that the moose did not move, that the eyes were glassy, fixed and dull. He had a dead moose wedged in some trees, with antlers wider of spread than the other.

That big bull had brokn its neck when it plunged over the cliff in its furious charge.

Jack's voyage down Eagle Rock Route was uneventful, except that he met old Top

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Tom halfway down, guiding two hunters in, and told him where he could find some meat for camp if he hurried to get there before the wolves came.

The payoff came after Jack wired to the man in New York, giving the dimensions of the great head. It was a check for $300. And then Top Tom, returning, brought word that Bearhide Bill had been found dead in his cabin and that he had left a note saying that there was good Peterboro canoe in the woodshed which belonged to Jack Randall. Before his death the old man must have repented the trick he'd played on Jack. Thereafter, Jack was known as Two Moosehead Jack.

The Story Tellers' Circle

Our Football-Playing Author

YOU'VE noticed, doubtless, that a Bertrand Shurtleff yarn is featured on the current SHORT STORIES marquee. "Beyond the Brooks" is a four-parter, reintroducing Mr. Shurtleff whose last in our direction was "Long Lash." In this new story also reappear those ex-Army dogs, Huskie and Spareribs, of "Long Lash" fame.

At the time of Shurtleff's "Long Lash" we ran some comments in this here Circle about the good author's football prowess. We'd gleaned these from a publicity release from the Great Man himself. In rebuttal he claimed then—and does now in his latest communique to us—that he "did *not* play all four . . . line positions in football at *the same time;* never more than *three positions simultaneously!*"

As can be seen, Mr. Shurtleff is getting his own joke in now, at our expense, which is fair enough. Signals off, though. As a matter of pure record this department knows whereof it speaks when it admits the only joke about Bert Shurtleff's gridiron antics was on the other team. He was probably the greatest lineman in Brown University football history, is faithfully listed in many grid "All" compilations. And them's the facts!

Other random news from Rhode Island and Shurtleff's summer domicile there which must be nice well into winter, going by the date on his letter:

"I built a little summer cottage on this old farm in Adamsville, R. I., where I was born, draw my water from an old Indian spring my grandfather walled up, fish for trout, pickerel, and bass in fresh water and the celebrated striped bass in salt—the best striper fishing in the world too! Bought my first gear for it last year and caught my first fish, although I have friends who have fished for ten years without taking one—and one friend who took fifty-four in four days when the run was on.

"Four years ago I gave up teaching high school English, after twenty-one years of that and ten of coaching football, to devote all my time to writing and lecturing. I speak before about 300,000 high school pupils every year, having worked for University of Wisconsin, University of Minnesota, two seasons with Antrim Bureau of Philadelphia, and one each with Southeast Assemblies and Dorothy Bennett Bureau.

"Beginning in December, 1948, I am booking myself, after just finishing a tour in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois. I expect to concentrate in Indiana and Illinois, with some engagements in Michigan and Ohio.

"By the way," Shurtleff asks, "do you still buy stories from my fellow teacher of old, Berton Cook? I lent him Culpepper Chunn's *'Plotting the Short Story'* to cut his literary teeth on when we both taught at B. M. C. Durfee High in Fall River!" (Cook appears in this and many other SHORT STORIES—Ed.)

BERTRAND SHURTLEFF.

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Cornered Skipper

"LATE in the Depression Years, I got me a chance to sail aboard a vessel going coastwise," says B. E. Cook whose "Skipper Was Cornered" is in this issue. "One day between watches, the Third had me in his room. He drew a sketch of an old-time tanker, German variety, in which he'd gone as a 'boy.' She carried a few such, learning their trade. One day he was washing clothes for a mate, outside the fo-castle with a bucket, while some of the others were below on the next deck worming food out of the crew's stores in an icebox underneath their fo'castle. Along came the old pump man to sound the freshwater tank down—away down—forward. Nobody noticed he hadn't a flashlight with him. He was an old ship's carpenter turned pump man and he had never developed the respect he should have for petroleum fumes. Since the water tank down forward did sometimes have gasoline fumes over the water, it and he became dangerous.

"This time, however, the ship was at anchor below the Mississippi Delta, a German ship which had just completed a crossing, and there was aboard her that few hours of relaxation which obtains in such intervals aboard a vessel.

"After the pump man passed in by the boy doing laundry in a bucket, he went on down. The food-filching sailors kidded him as he went down past them. At that moment, Fritz took his bucket of used suds outside, hove it over the ship's rail and went aft for more hot water.

"He had reached the open storage space underneath the bridge when a terrific explosion up forward all but blew the ship's bows inside out. In relating the experience to me, Fritz said something like this: 'It was luck. Nothing else. Half a minute later with my suds and I'd have been blown to pieces like all the others, for I'd have maybe gone inside for a moment to get in on the kidding.' "

B. E. COOK.

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The Shooter's Corner

(Continued from page 4)

came across a rifle having one of these barrels, and wanted to get it for my collection—but unfortunately it was already sold.

Chrome moly barrel steel is an alloy steel containing chromium and molybenum, and this is the type material that Mr. Gregoire uses for many of his .219 Wasp barrels. He likes to use steel that is quite hard, testing from 28 to 32 Rockwell. Such a hard alloy is more difficult to machine, but gives better results.

When making one of his justly celebrated barrels for the .219 Donaldson Wasp cartridge he ordinarily starts out with a round bar of steel a little over 30 inches long and 1 5/16 inches in diameter. The first chore is to start drilling a .210 hole through this bar, and believe me it is quite a job to have it come out anywhere near the center at the other end. It takes about a half hour to drill this hole if everything goes right. It has taken as long as three hours to do this job, not counting setting up, and any drill sharpening that may be necessary.

Next, the bore is checked to see if it is straight. If there is a slight bend, it is located and straightened. Ordinarily, a barrel is straightened by use of an overhead barrel straightening press. Mr. Gregoire has such a machine, but he seldom uses it for he prefers the older, more difficult, but more satisfactory method of doing the job with a hammer. If there is a bend present he locates it, and smacks the barrel a sharp blow with an ordinary machinist's hammer, at the right spot of course. It takes a lot of know-how to do this and get the proper results.

If the outside of the barrel is to be turned to smaller dimensions, Mr. Gregoire sometimes does the job at this stage of the game.

The straight barrel is now reamed to a diameter of .219 inches which takes from ¾ to 1 hour average time. It is again checked to see that the hole is straight. If a barrel requires too much straightening it is discarded.

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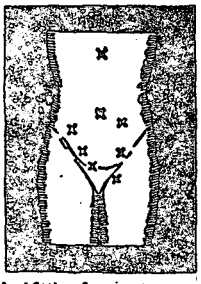

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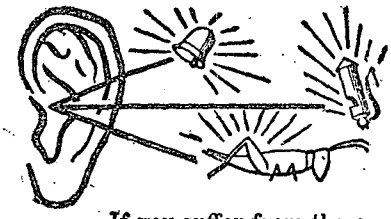

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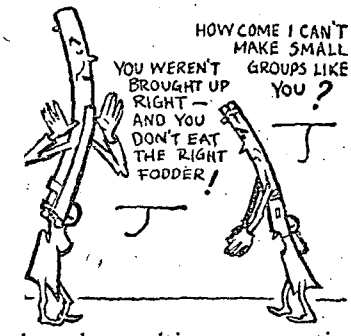
Next, the bore is rifled. In other words, the grooves which will cause the bullet to spin with gyroscopic effect are cut into the bore. With the diameter to the bottom of the grooves at just .224 inch, the important work in making a barrel is finished as Gregoire barrels are not lapped (highly polished with fine abrasives.) This may seem strange when we consider that the majority of fine barrels made today are lapped, but Gregoire believes that if the workmanship involved in reaming and rifling is of sufficient quality there is not only no need for lapping, but lapping may, in fact, take away some of the inherent shooting qualities of such a barrel.



The barrel casualties are sometimes quite high in the Gregoire shop as the boss will not deliver a barrel unless he considers it exactly right. For example, he recently received a batch of barrel steel that was no good. He discovered this appalling fact the hard way . . . by trying to make a couple of barrels. In other words, a lot of effort ended up in the junk box. And unfortunately, there is no way of telling if a batch of steel is just right for Gregoire's purposes. In such an instance a drill, or reamer, or rifling head may also be ruined, and there goes the profit on several barrels.

When I visited Mr. Gregoire he was making a barrel that measured 1½ inches in diameter at the muzzle, which really is a big one. It will be used by a Pennsylvania bench rest shooter.

It may be true that the life of a maker of super fine barrels is not always a bed of roses, but the satisfaction of knowing that the product his handiwork is winning fame in a field where precision is the pass word, must be very comforting to Mr. John Gregoire. Come to think about it . . . he isn't starving to death.

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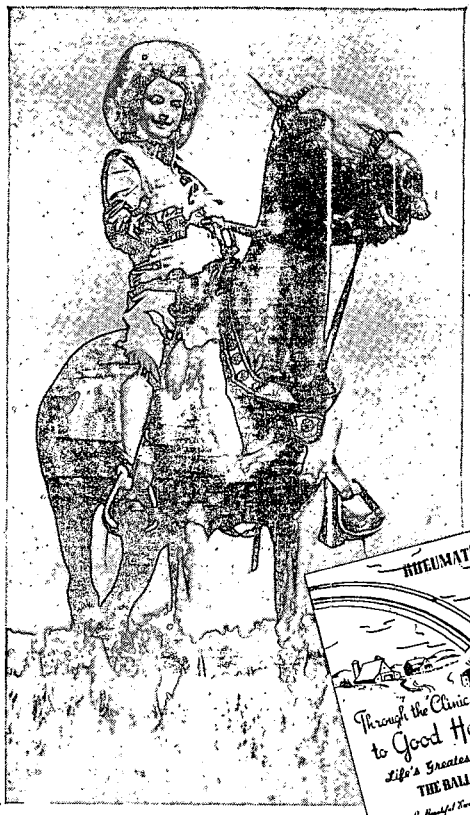
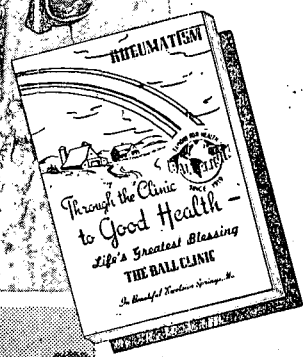


RHEUMATISM

is the signal that Your Health needs attention!



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ARTHRITIS,
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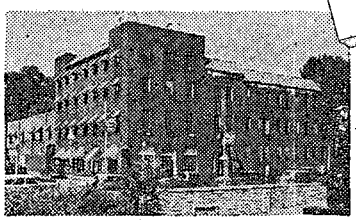
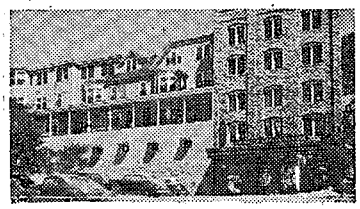


THE BALL CLINIC



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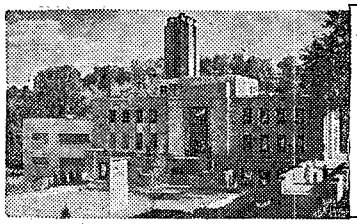

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